

READING THE MIDDLE EAST:
A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF CLASSROOM LITERACY EVENTS AROUND
PERSEPOLIS

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ABSTRACT

Kate R. Allman: Reading the Middle East: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Classroom Literacy
Events Around *Persepolis*
(Under the direction of Julie E. Justice)

This six-month qualitative study draws from critical sociocultural theories of literacy (Street, 2007; Enciso, 2007; Moje, 2007) to explore the social discourses invoked and produced during two classroom literacy events around the Iranian graphic novel, *Persepolis*, by Marjane Satrapi. Data was analyzed using critical discourse analysis (Gee, 2004) to explore the ways in which power and privilege were discursively constructed around the memoir. Findings identify neo-Orientalist and liberal Whiteness discourses that were invoked, produced, and negotiated among participants before, during, and after the reading of *Persepolis*. Findings also describe how an Egyptian-American, male student used the text to construct a counter-story that challenged anti-Arab and anti-Muslim discourses. Discussion points to implications for the field of critical sociocultural literacy research and shares alternative approaches to teaching *Persepolis* in order to understand and transform geopolitical power and privilege.

For my mother and father, Debbie and Mike Robb
and
Justin and Ella, my lights

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CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND, PURPOSE, AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Readers of critical fiction cannot approach work assuming that they already possess a language of access, or that the text will mirror realities that they already know and understand. Much critical fiction dynamically seeks to deconstruct conventional ways of knowing.

—hooks, 1991, p. 57

“I like to read books about girls like me,” Aïcha says as she self-consciously pulls her navy blue tunic under her legs and tucks the loose drapes of her white *hijab* beneath her neck. Aïcha is a seventh grade student at a community-sponsored Islamic school in North Carolina. She likes to play basketball and she loves to talk about the books that she is reading.

“And who are girls like you?” I ask.

She shrugs and replies with a smirk: “You know, girls that are all mixed up.”

Aïcha’s parents immigrated to the United States from Algeria in the 1990s, and while Aïcha was born in the United States and identifies as American, her parents’ ancestry makes her self-location within American national discourses of belonging difficult. She explains:

Both of my parents are from Algeria, but my mom’s grandmother was French and one of her great-great somethings was British. My dad’s great-great grandfather was Turkish or something, so...I have these different roots and everything. So, I don’t know. It’s a mixture for me. I was born here, so that means I’m American. I’m Algerian, that means I’m Arab. And I have Turkish and French roots. So that means I’m really mixed up.

At the time that I was speaking with Aïcha, she and I had been meeting to design a webpage, sharing the experiences of youth who identify as both Arab and American. From our

conversations, I learned that reading books featuring Muslim, Arab girls is one way that Aïcha tries to make sense of her life as a proud middle school, Muslim girl living in a Southern, urban city. “We never get to at school,” she smiles, “but I really like to read books about girls like me.”

I became interested in Aïcha’s story, along with the stories of twelve of her classmates, after spending several months in England during graduate school where I had the opportunity to develop relationships with several Arab and South-Asian Muslim families and students. My conversations with these families forced me to face the reality of the well-documented anti-Arab and anti-Muslim bias in England (Ali, 1992; Hussain, 2006; Sharpes, Shou, and Karlsen, 2009; Thrandhardt, 1995): educators who treated children and their parents with suspicion; predominantly Arab and Muslim communities referred to as “Muslim ghettos”; vocalized resistance to thriving Muslim state-sponsored schools. On several occasions, I had the troubling experience of witnessing this prejudice. And I started to wonder: *What are the experiences of Arab-American students in schools in the southern United States?*

When I returned from England, the United States had erupted in a fury of what *Newsweek* referred to as “Islamophobia” (November, 2011). The Muslim community in Lower Manhattan was receiving national attention for their proposed Muslim community center located two blocks from the Trade Center site. Arab-American artists and scholars were responding with hurt, anger, and frustration. Emotional responses were further fueled by right-wing politicians who called the project “offensive” and insult to the victims of the September 11th attacks (Hernandez, 2010), and a Florida community planned a Quran-burning in protest. Later that week, protests were organized outside a Tennessee mosque approximately four hours from my home and a

series of physical and verbal assaults against Muslims and Arab students occurred across the country.

For the next year, under the guidance of Dr. Sahar Amer, Professor of Asian Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, I worked alongside a local Islamic School and interviewed self-identifying Arab and American middle school students about what it means to be “Arab” and “American.” During this time, I met Aïcha and twelve of her classmates who taught me about their family histories and relationships with these complicated terms and labels. The students taught me a lot over those six months. Most importantly, they taught me that despite their common identification as “Arab” and “American,” their diverse histories and relationships with their Arab and American identity resisted any form of totalizing generalizations. The story of the “Arab-American” student that emerged was this: There is no story; there are only stories. While I did hear similar stories about relatives being called a “terrorist” or told to “speak English,” what I heard most were stories of history and resilience that were far more different than similar. I heard from Talil, who writes Arabic rap and looks forward to learning how to drive on a BMW at his father’s car dealership; Sheherazade, who fantasized about becoming a pop-music star but experienced a tension between this desire and her love for Allah; Trinny, who wanted to be a doctor and loved to spend time with her family; and Layla, who loved fashion and secretly watched episodes of *Gilmore Girls* on her laptop. Despite similar public taunts experienced by themselves and other family members, each student had a different response: tears, anger, frustration, confusion, denial, laughter, disbelief. But most often I heard an answer of compassion, an understanding of ignorance, and a determination to patiently speak back to and challenge dominant narratives about Muslims and Arabs.

Simultaneously, I was working with Aicha, I was a graduate student at the University of North Carolina at chapel Hill, serving as a University Supervisor for the Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) English Education Program at UNC. In this role, I was responsible for conducting four rounds of observations for six English Education Masters students per semester. Typically, at the beginning of the semester, I would also see their mentor teach alongside or with them. Over the course of these two years, I started to see several English teachers, in classes of predominantly White students, teach books written by Iranian, Afghani, or Iraqi authors alongside the traditional English canon (Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, etc.): one of which was *Persepolis*. As an emerging scholar of literacy with an interest in Middle Eastern Studies, I was intrigued by these selections. On one hand, I saw the texts' potential to serve as "critical fictions" (Mariani, 1991; hooks, 1991) that could highlight the political, social and cultural experiences of their authors and the communities they represent.¹ According to hooks (1991), critical fictions can serve as an important site of liberation for their authors. She explains:

"Globally, literature that enriches resistance struggles speaks about the way the individuals in repressive, dehumanizing situations use imagination to sustain life and maintain critical awareness" (p. 55).

Among individuals who also identify with the communities the author represents, critical fictions can also model or serve as a site of liberation, through a text's description of political, social, and cultural experiences of the author (Enciso, 1992). For those who identify outside of the authors' communities, critical fictions can also serve as "disruptive texts" that show long-standing stereotypes or provide counter images to stereotypes of singular points of view (Enciso, 2001).

¹ Critical fictions often feature the voices of authors from underrepresented and marginalized communities. Their writing works to claim a space in society, and in the larger literary community, that has been historically dominated by white, male perspectives.

For all of these reasons, I saw and see the potential for using Middle Eastern literature in the classroom.

However, I was also skeptical of these text selections. Every interpretive act around a text involves the reader's cultural locations and positionality (Enciso, 1992). As Americans, we are raised within a cultural ethos that promotes and encourages domination (Mutua, 2000). We participate in a history of occupation and are currently occupying or helping others occupy large areas of land in Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine. As a result, I questioned the selection of novels from these countries within the English curriculum. I asked: *Why are predominantly white, female teachers selecting these books in their predominantly white classroom? How are they being taught? What notions of self and 'other' are being constructed during the teaching and reading of these texts?*

The increased incorporation of "Middle Eastern" literature mirrors an increased commodification, and resulting publication, of literature written by individuals living or who have lived in the Middle East (Bahramitash, 2005; McAlister, 2005; Rostami-Povey, 2007; Shohat, 1994, 2013; Taylor, 2007) and the growing interest in global education (Banks, 2001, 2004; Ho, 2009; Hull & Stornaiulo, 2010; Irvine, 2003). For example, the new Common Core Standards, adopted by 42 of 50 states, explicitly calls for students to learn about "global histories and cultures through literature and informational texts from across genres, eras, and world regions" (Common Core Standards, 2013). Both of these factors, the increased commodification of "Middle Eastern" literature and increased interest in "global education" have contributed to the growing incorporation of "Middle Eastern" literature and texts in the high school classroom (Webb, 2011; NCTE, 2012, 2013; Harvard Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 2013). While content analyses and cultural studies analyses of popular Middle Eastern literature is increasingly

being conducted (Elahi, 2008; Crichlow, 2013; Hendelman-Baavur, 2008; Karim and Rahimieh, 2008; Malek, 2006; Shohat, 2013), few researchers have examined “Middle Eastern literature” is being taught or read in public school classroom settings.

Focus of the Study:

This dissertation draws from sociocultural theories of literacy to describe a six-month qualitative study examining the discourses invoked and produced during two classroom literacy events around an exilic Iranian memoir, *Persepolis*, by Marjane Satrapi. The primary research question guiding this inquiry is:

- What discourses are invoked and produced during two classroom literacy events around *Persepolis*?

Research sub-questions include:

- What discourses are invoked by ten focal students prior to reading *Persepolis*?
- What discourses are invoked and produced during the classroom reading of *Persepolis*?
- What discourses are invoked after reading *Persepolis*?
- What discourses does the teacher bring to the literacy event?

Drawing from Critical Whiteness discourses, I also intend to respond to calls for the exploration of how racial relations are produced in specific contexts and times (Hall, 2000; Kosek, 2004; Essed & Goldberg, 2000) and an examination of privilege and how it shapes those who hold it (DiAngelo, 2006; Dyer, 1997; Frankenberg, 1997; McIntosh, 1988; Morrison, 1992; Powell, 1997).

What follows is, I hope, a compassionate exploration of my own experiences collecting and analyzing these discourses--not with the intention of exposing how ‘bad’ the teachers and

students I worked with are as human beings. The teacher and students that I worked with are all beautiful people, with open hearts willing to learn and grow--as I often strive to have and hope that my readers do as well. Their words are both theirs and not theirs--they come from their mouths, but they are more representation of the 'acid rain' of discourses that frame the experiences of most Americans (Blumenfeld, 2010). In the same vein, I hope that this dissertation does not promote me as a 'good white.' As a White person who was socialized as a White person, I am implicated at all times in racist relations with people of color, and I want to be as explicit as possible in this naming. Instead, I see this project as one small way to make visible the ways in which power and Whiteness operate. I hope that by making visible the silences, the good intentions, and the nice-sounding words that often disguise how Whiteness functions within the English classroom, I can follow other scholars of color and whites to work with teachers to begin deconstructing familiar and unspoken norms that reproduce racism and introduce new alternatives.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

ستين کسانى هستند دست کى انگشتان
The fingers of one hand are not the same

In my study, I sometimes use a contested term, “the Middle East,” to describe a general geographic area. I use this term with caution and follow Alsutany (2009) and Shohat (2009, 2013) who identify the term as problematic and often inappropriate but ultimately choose to use the term to speak back to dominant Orientalist representations and describe the variegated identities in the regions described that do not fit within the traditional “Arab” and “Muslim” rubric: including Amazigh/Berbers, Arab-Christians, Arab-Jews, Armenians, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Copts, Druze, Kurds, Iranians, Nubians, and Turks, to name of a few. Like Alsutany (2009) and Shohat (2009, 2013), along with other postcolonial scholars of Middle Eastern studies, I have included quotes around the term “the Middle East,” to critique the term’s broad signification of a broad geographic spectrum and point to its colonial and Eurocentric genealogy.

The term “the Middle East” was created in the early-twentieth century by European and American military leaders to describe a region that extended around the Mediterranean (Sorenson, 2008). This geographic label has been criticized as Eurocentric, as the term defines a region by its geographical relationship to Europe instead of more indigenous descriptors (Abdel Aal, 1986; Kaplan 1994; Keddie, 1973). The term has also been used to describe a group of countries and regions that have relatively few characteristics that could be used to view them together as a region:

As diverse as the countries of Europe, these lands are included in a single term only because they are “near to” or “in the middle of” other regions. Whatever unity does exist within the region today is largely functional: it is a unity in relation to the outside world rather than an inherent unity arising from similar geographical and social conditions or from a recent common history (Rippenburg, 2008, p.1)

Throughout history, the naming of land has been used as a means of asserting control within an area (Whitelam, 1996). In the Middle East, colonial powers mapped the land that they colonized, engaging in what Edward Saïd refers to as acts of “imaginative geography” (Saïd , 1995, p. 49). They conducted what Saïd (2001) terms the “epistemological conquest of territory” by assigning names and boundaries that neglected indigenous relationships to the land and then wrote histories of the land that gave authority to these names.

“The Middle East” was invented and gained prominence in the early 20th century due to the security interests of Britain and later the United States. Used first by British officer General Sir Thomas Edwards Gordon (1900) and subsequently by Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan (1902), the term was used to describe the land located between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. While these initial writings were responsible for introducing the term, the actual areas designated within the term received cursory attention; the authors merely emphasized the military and commercial importance of the areas between the two naval areas (Koppes, 1976). British policy-makers, however, later adopted the term *Middle East* to indicate a then-Ottoman region that was viewed to be vital to ensuring British interests in India. Afterwards, the term became ‘common sense’; however, the regions included in the term have changed as the security concerns of its inventors have changed (Bilgin, 2005).

Since then, the term has been critiqued by many inside and outside the Arab world as a poor representation of the land being described. According to Bahgat Korany (1997), many in the Arab world were critical of the term and argued against becoming a “hinterland laying between Europe and Asia, a mere geographical expansion” (Heikal, 1978, p. 719). Abdel Aal (1986) criticized the term as a “euphemism for secure spheres of influence,” suggesting that the term authenticated the power held by those in Europe, the United States, and Russia, and diminished the leadership of those living within the regions described by the term. Authors Ali Eddin Hillal Dessouki and Jamil Matar (1979, 1980, 1983) expressed this dissent in their widely read *The Arab Regional System: An Examination of Inter-Arab Political Relations*:

- (1) the term Middle East does not refer to a geographical area but rather it represents a political term in its creation and usage;
- (2) the term is not derived from the nature of the area or its political cultural, civilizational and demographic characteristics; for when we use the term ‘Middle’ we have to ask ‘middle’ in reference to what?;
- (3) the term tears up the Arab homeland as a distinct unit since it has always included non-Arab states (1986, p. 197-8).

The descriptor *Middle East* was critiqued as not only arbitrary and Eurocentric, but also as an inaccurate attempt to describe a region with diverse histories, religions, languages, and social practices as a united whole.

While the term has been resisted by those living within the regions identified within the Middle East (Hogsdon, 1974; Keddie, 1973) for the aforementioned reasons, the term has also been appropriated by many living within the geographical region who now refer to region as

بالله م الاوشـرق الشرق است (Khavare) الأوسط الشرق صحيفة (al sharq al-awsat)

mirayeh), (Orta Doğu) and התיכון מזרח (ha mizrakh a tikhan) representing its Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Hebrew equivalents, respectively (Boulding, 1995, p. 12).

Alternative terms have been proposed by scholars and individuals living within the region. In 1978, Mohammed Heikal (1978), the one-time advisor to Egyptian President Nasser and editor of the Egyptian daily *Al-Ahram*, proposed another representation, the “Arab System” that was based, he argued, on a united religion, history, and culture. Two Egyptian authors, Ali Eddin Hillal Dessouki and Jamil Matar (1983) elaborated on Heikal’s concept and introduced the representation “Arab Regional System” to replace that of the Middle East. However, this term has been resisted by many living within the region who do not identify as Arab. Instead, some scholars have chosen to use the term “Southwest Asia and North Africa” (Shelley, 2011).

So why do I choose to use a term that is rooted in Eurocentric and imperial practices? I believe that it is important to engage with, as opposed to resist, the enormous power contained in the term “the Middle East” and the imaginative spaces that it conjures within the American psyche, culture, and classroom: terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism, Anti-Americanism, instability, oppression of women (Held, 2005, p. 3-4). In *not using the term*, we risk neglecting the manufactured and oversimplified geographical imaginings that have not only shaped many American students’ perceptions of the Middle East but also informed government and political actions within the United States (Driver, 2005; Haldrup, Koefoed, and Simonsen, 2006; Painter 2006). However, I also intend to use the term tongue-in-cheek, in that my study attempts to investigate and challenge the totalizing myths and colonial discourses that are at use in the term.

This means that during this project, I will simultaneously engage and challenge the histories, images, and practices that revolve around the term “the Middle East.” In many ways, I

think that this is the only way to address the complexities of representation around texts that are in conversation with these broad Orientalist discourses.

Traditionally, “the Middle East” has included the regions between modern-day Turkey, Iran and sometimes Afghanistan, the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula, and Egypt. “The Greater Middle East,” sometimes referred to as “the New Middle East,” extended this definition to include Pakistan, the southern shores of the Mediterranean, and the Sudan (Nazemroaya, 2006). Within the academic community, the term “the Middle East” also inappropriately includes countries of North Africa, the Arab countries of Asia, Israel, and the non-Arab countries of Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey. For the sake of this study in this American context, I will follow in the work of Alsutany and Shohat (2013) to define “the Middle East” as countries that Americans most often associate with the Middle East: Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen, and Afghanistan (Rippenburg, 2008).

Figure 1. *Map of the Middle East*



Countries in Middle East (2011). Retrieved from http://countries.bridgat.com/Middle_East.html

CHAPTER 2: *PERSEPOLIS* AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Persepolis is a two-part, French-language graphic memoir written by Iranian-born, French exile Marjane Satrapi. Drawn in black and white, *Persepolis I* depicts Satrapi's life as a child following the Iranian Revolution (1978-79) and the war between Iran and Iraq (1980-1988). *Persepolis 2* describes Satrapi's remembered experiences living in Europe and Iran as a young adult (*Persepolis 2* is rarely read in high school English classrooms due to its sexual content and drug references.) *Persepolis* is often considered part of a new wave of autobiographic writing by diasporic Iranian women, including Tara Bamhrampour's *To See and See Again: A Life in Iran and America* (2000), Gelareh Assayesh's *Saffron Sky: A Life Between Iran and America* (2002), Firoozeh Dumas's *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America* (2003), Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003), Roya Hakakian's *Journey from Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran* (2004), and Azadeh Moaveni's *Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America and America in Iran* (2005).

On one hand, *Persepolis* has been highly acclaimed by many literary scholars (Naghibi & O'Malley, 2005; Tensuan, 2006). Some herald the text as a prime example of post-colonial, transcultural narrative (Davis, 2005; Heer & Worcester, 2012; Honary, 2013) that maps out the complexities and contingencies of identity (Naghibi & O'Malley, 2005) through an innovative autobiographical, graphic/text medium (Chute, 2008; Tensuan, 2006). Tensuan (2006) states that *Persepolis* "recast[s] the visual and narrative conventions of comics to provide critical

commentary on issues ranging from the social construction of gender to the forces subtending forms of prejudice” (2006). Naghibi and O’Malley (2005) argue that *Persepolis* uses autobiographical narrative to “challenge the stereotype of the self-effacing, modest Iranian woman and to write themselves back into the history of the nation” (p. 223). Some English Education scholars believe that *Persepolis* “provides a creative venue for classroom discussions about nation, citizenship, gender, and war” and “offers a transversal space in which students can question Western notions about the Middle East” (Botshon & Plastas, 2009). They continue:

By offering students a more complex and less dualistic perspective on Iranian society and women in particular, *Persepolis* encourages students to question the source of their (perceived) national insecurity and offers models of agency rooted in the homeland (Iran) they have been encouraged to fear (p. 2).

However, *Persepolis* and its enormous popularity in the United States has also been critiqued, particularly in the fields of Middle Eastern Studies (cooke, 2008; Whitlock, 2006). *Persepolis*, and its popularity in the West, have been argued to represent the “syndication” of subaltern life story (Whitlock, 2006) and a global economy that profits from a commodification of trauma and testimony (cooke, 2008). Keshavarz (2007) argues that texts like *Persepolis* produce a “New Orientalist narrative” (p. 2) which “erases the complexity and richness of local Iranian culture and substitutes it with a picture of “evil Muslim behavior” in relief against the “unconditional goodness of things Western” (p. 122). Whitlock (2008) characterizes autobiographies like *Persepolis* as “soft weapons” that “[play] a major role in the global commodification of cultural differences that has been a boom industry in the recent past” (p. 54). Cooke (2008) explains that while life narratives are “vitally important because they can perform ‘small acts of cultural translation in a time of precarious life’ (p. 23),” she warns that texts like

Persepolis can be “easily co-opted into propaganda” (pp. 3, 105). “The challenge to the autobiographer,” she writes, “is to walk the fine line between co-optation and cultural translation” (p. 190).

Since its publication, *Persepolis* has increasingly been incorporated in secondary Social Studies and English classrooms, frequently as a means of teaching about “Middle Eastern” history and events despite its transcultural geography (Annett, 2008; Downey, 2009; Matthews, 2011; Morrell, 2002). Several researchers have explored how *Persepolis* is taught in the social studies classroom, primarily as a way to teach “global conflict” within the region (Christensen, 2006; Nye, 2004). A growing body of English Education research has studied how *Persepolis* is being taught in the English classroom (Botshon, et. al, 2009; Hammond, 2009; Jacobs, 2007; Mortimore, 2009; Spanger, 2010); however, most of this literature examines how *Persepolis* is being taught as a graphic novel in the English classroom (Chun, 2009; Jacobs, 2007; Mortimore, 2009), not a “global literature” text. Very little attention has been paid to how the text is being taught and read in the global English classroom. This study attempts to fill this gap in the research by examining the social discourses invoked and produced before, during, and after two classroom readings of the Iranian memoir, *Persepolis*. In doing so, this research seeks to

Orientalist Textual Discourses and (Im)possibilities for Reading

The discourses that were invoked and produced by the students and teacher during the literacy events around *Persepolis* were both informed and limited by the discourses evoked and constructed in Satrapi’s memoir. In order to frame the discourses that were invoked, reproduced, resisted, and silenced during the classroom reading of *Persepolis*, it is important to, first, name the discourses that Satrapi evokes and produces in *Persepolis* and the possibilities for reading. Drawing from cultural studies analyses of Satrapi’s memoir (Chute, 2010; Malek, 2006), I name

the ways in which the text serves as a critical fiction that resists dominant, negative representations and discourses about Iran. However, I also point to Satrapi's positionality and how it has been interpreted to inform the discourses she invokes and produces. In turn, I name how these discourses have the potential to reproduce dominant neo-Orientalist discourses and postcolonial whiteness discourses during classroom readings.

The Cultural Revolution

Persepolis is written by Iranian exile Marjane Satrapi, an author who has lived in France for most of her adult life after leaving Iran in the 1990s. In *Persepolis I*, Satrapi represents her experiences during the Cultural Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War while living in Iran as a child. The Cultural Revolution was a unique period in Iran's history that followed the overthrow of Reza Shah (Mohammed Reza Pahlavi), the last Shah of the Qajar dynasty and the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty. Reza Shah was overthrown due to a complicated set of factors including, but not limited to, a historical distrust of the governing body, his determination to 'modernize' Iran based on an American model, growing socioeconomic disparities between social classes, shifts in intellectual Islamic thought, and conflicts between several ethnic and social groups in Iran (Katouzian, 2010). Ayatollah Khomeini, a previously-exiled religious and political figure in Iran, helped lead the Iranian Revolution that overthrew Reza Shah with the hope of later 'advising' his country. However, shortly after the Revolution ended, Khomeini drafted a new Iranian constitution that established an Islamic Iranian government that was run *wilayat al-faqih*, or ruled by a marja' Islamic cleric, which eventually named Khomeini as the Supreme Leader, or the highest ranking political and religious authority of the nation. In this role, Khomeini made a series of social, political, and governmental changes to better align Iran with Khomeini's interpretation of Sharia (Islamic) law, termed the Cultural Revolution.

While some of the changes Khomeini made were well-received and aimed to change the socioeconomic disparities and cultural suppression experienced under the Pahlavi dynasty, many others sought to suppress divergent voices and isolate Iranians from perspectives that were not interpreted to be “Islamic.” For example, in 1979, when a group of pro-imperialists voiced their dissent regarding changes made under Khomeini’s leadership, Khomeini said:

Those who are trying to bring corruption and destruction to our country in the name of democracy will be oppressed. They are worse than Bani-Ghorizeh Jews, and they must be hanged. We will oppress them by God's order and God's call to prayer (Matini, 2010).

The changes and suppression initiated by Khomeini impacted the lives of Iranian citizens in a variety of ways, some for better and others for worse.

Since the 1980s, when public expression restrictions in Iran were lifted, men and women chose to share and document their experiences during the Cultural Revolution through memoir or other forms of historical documentation. Many exiles that left Iran during or after the Cultural Revolution have written memoirs to document and share their experiences during this time. Most surprisingly, however, has been the emergence of many female Iranian voices sharing their experiences of the Cultural Revolution, a privilege previously unavailable to women. These Iranian exilic or diasporic memoirs are unique in that they trespass traditional Iranian literacy practices that have privileged male writers; however, they also serve as a transgressive act that bears testimony to experiences that “the family, the tribe, and the society unit may not want told to the world at large” (Begum, 2012, p. 266). It also challenges traditional notions of women’s self-effacement found in colonial travel writings or other “third-person narratives.” As Begum writes:

Through their retellings, “the subaltern voices of these women discover a newfound subjectivity and agency of their own’ which ‘enable[s] them to write women’s stories back into their cultural and national history’ (p. 266-267). These stories and memoirs have become powerful counter-narratives and have shown that ‘...despite limitation placed upon them within a fundamentalist regime, Iranian women assert themselves and vocalize dissent in their own way.’ (p. 268)

In 2001, after the events surrounding 9/11, books written by Iranian women about the Cultural Revolution became extremely popular. Between 2000 and 2005, over 25 Iranian memoirs (100% of them written by women) were published in the United States, including including Tara Bamhrampour’s *To See and See Again: A Life in Iran and America* (2000), Gelareh Assayesh’s *Saffron Sky: A Life Between Iran and America* (2002), Firoozeh Dumas’s *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America* (2003), Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003), Roya Hakakian’s *Journey from Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran* (2004), and Azadeh Moaveni’s *Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America and America in Iran* (2005). Simultaneously, as the United States justified its invasion into Iraq and its increasing hostility towards Iran, George Bush identified Iran (and North Korea) as “the Axis of Evil.” Khani Begum (2010), an author and professor of Iranian literature, posed critical questions around the popularity of Iranian women memoirs:

Why are so many Iranian women writing books? Why so many memoirs? Is each one of these lives interesting enough to merit a book? Is there a market for all these books? Are Iranian women getting paid by the Bush administration to write bad things about Iran to

convince the American people that a military attack against the country is a noble idea?

(Begum, 2010)

Her critique echoes those of others who critique the appropriation of select Iranian narratives in the West and attribute it to the Orientalist desire to read about the “exotic” and “oppressed” other in order to validate the US as a geographic center of freedom, human rights, and feminist empowerment (Rastegar, 2006; Saljoughi, 2008). Naghibi and O’Malley state: “There is currently in the West a greater interest in hearing from a member of the axis of evil, especially in an autobiographical form that promises to disclose the intimate secrets of an exotic other” (Kassam, 210, p. 280). Begum (2010) writes: “The popularity in the West of select narratives derives from their insider position, which allows them to function as a form of subaltern speech, thereby providing for the West a lens into the mysterious lives of women in the Orient” (p. 266).

The popularity of *Persepolis*, and other exilic Iranian memoirs written by women, is situated in this unique historical moment when memoirs written by Iranian women were increasingly popular. When read by a Western audience, and informed by the events surrounding 9/11, Iranian memoirs, like Satrapi’s *Persepolis*, have the potential to use the transgressive voices of Iranian women to fuel and feed the Orientalist perceptions of a Western audience. Perhaps one of the most well known Iranian memoirs written by an Iranian female is *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), an American bestseller that documents the teaching of British literature by a university professor who was fired from her university for refusing to wear the *hijab*. The memoir documents her book club of five Iranian women who meet to discuss “Western literature” during the Cultural Revolution.

Satrapi’s Positionality and Discourses

In Satrapi's novel, she documents her experience as an upper class, Western-educated woman from an aristocratic Iranian family. In *Persepolis*, Satrapi depicts herself as part of a social elite of Iran: her father drives a Cadillac and they have a maid. Her family can afford to send her to an expensive European boarding school and her parents refuse to leave Iran because of the degraded social status that they would experience. Her childhood account critiques the social disparity that her family experienced in comparison to some of Iran's poorer classes; however, her critique does not neutralize or negate the discourses that were available and that she drew from. Relatedly, she emphasizes her Western education through (almost unbelievable) childhood references to Western philosophers like Marx and Hegel and her enjoyment of British and American bands like Kansas and Michael Jackson. She depicts her childhood self as enjoying Western clothing like leather jackets, Nike shoes, and Michael Jackson pins.

For these reasons, Satrapi's book has repeatedly been referenced as "very accessible" to a Western audience. Most critics praise her feminism and cite the universality of her characters. One critic "marvel[ed] at how she has made Iranian culture so readily accessible to Western audiences" (Kassam, 210, p. 280). However, this accessibility and universality has also been critiqued and attributed to the internalization of Orientalist discourses. One scholar wrote:

"The rave reviews of *Persepolis*, a story that ostensibly is the experience of the 'radical Other,' all stress its *accessibility and universality*...I find in this attempt to domesticate by homogenizing and making the radical other 'Western,' not just a paternalistic impulse on the part of Western media, but something integral to Satrapi's own vision of her experience as a European cosmopolitan in much the same way that Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* operates to find a liberating experience for her Iranian women students only in the Western literary canon." (p. 280)

Given these textual analyses, Satrapi's *Persepolis* has the potential to resist and challenge Euro-centric representations and discourses of Iran. However, Satrapi's positionality also has the potential to serve as an "informant" text that reproduces Euro-centric, capitalistic values that perpetuate global white supremacy.

CHAPTER 3: POSITIONALITY

“To deny the importance of subjectivity in the process of transforming the world and history is naïve and simplistic..Those who authentically commit themselves to the people must examine themselves constantly.”

-Paulo Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

“Mike can’t have a Negro for a groomsman,” my grandmother explained to my mother. I imagine her soft hands trembling: “The family won’t come. Is that what you want? The whole family not to come?” It was 1974 in Memphis, Tennessee, and my mother and father were engaged to be married. My father had moved from Missouri a couple years prior to play football at Memphis State. As a child I loved to hear how they met: A mutual friend set them up on a blind date. They spent the evening talking over milkshakes with friends and realized their mutual love for reading. “We would sit on Grandmama’s front porch,” my mother would explain, “and talk for hours about the books that we had read.” “Tell me again,” I would beg and she would recount the words again with a smile. “When I went to Missouri for the first time, your grandfather, he loved my southern accent,” she would continue. “I think he told your dad not to let me get away,” she would say with a smirk and a smile.

My mother had earned her accent honestly—her family had lived in the south for as long as she or anyone else could remember. Her father was born in Mississippi and moved to Bartlett, Tennessee, a small rural town outside of Memphis, with his father to help run a dairy. His family wasn’t wealthy, but they had enough to eat and he graduated from high school, enabling him to work at the Memphis Kimberly Clark paper factory when it opened. My grandmother, on the

other hand, was the youngest of five and raised by a single mother. A poor White woman in the south was not completely without White privilege (for example, she was able to keep the land she lived on after her husband left); however, as a single woman from a poor family and little formal education, she was multiply marginalized from the privileges of white racial identity (DiAngelo, 2004) and life during the Depression was hard. “We used to rinse out the paper towels and aluminum foil that we used and use them again,” she would say with a nod as she patted a wet paper towel against her linoleum countertops.

“One day,” she recounted, “when I was about six, I got bored. My mom had gone to the market and my siblings were all at school. And, I thought, ‘I’m going to make it look like the house was robbed.’ For fun,” she said as her eyes crinkled and I laughed. “I took out all of the flatware and opened up all of the drawers. I threw back the bedsheets. I made it looked like the house was robbed! I hid in the closet for an hour, waiting for everyone to come home, but no one did. So, I finally left and walked down to my friend Sue’s house. Well, on my way back, my sister came driving down the road saying, “Toots! Toots! We’ve been robbed!” She later told her family that it was a prank and got a ‘whoopin’ for it, but she told the story with pride and I loved it because it perfectly displayed my grandmother’s intelligence, humor, and feist.

When my grandmother and mother grew up, the law still starkly segregated Memphis. My mother still vividly remembers when the first Black students were integrated into her rural county high school. Several of her classmates graduated early to avoid attending classes with African-Americans. My mom’s high school boyfriend called her a “nigger-lover” for attending a party at an African-American classmates’ house. While many of the adults in my mother’s childhood community worked alongside African-Americans at work, White people didn’t socialize with African-Americans outside of work. It just wasn’t done.

“Mom, he’s going to be the groomsman. He’s Mike’s best friend from high school. If the family doesn’t want to come, they don’t have to,” I imagine my strong, courageous mother explaining as she grabbed her purse and walked out of her parents’ GI bill home. However, I know that my own re-telling is a revisionist history. My mother has told me that she was a ‘dutiful daughter,’ in her words, and I know that it was only after many upsetting weeks of tears and family tensions that my grandparents finally ‘allowed’ my dad’s best friend, Raymond, to be in the wedding. In my father’s mind, however, there was never a question.

Years later, I remember my grandmother locking her car door as a Black person walked by. “Why did you do that?” I asked her as I could see her shoulders tighten. “Kate,” she sighed, “You never know.” Most White women in the south hear these unspoken words when they are in their car, or at the gas station or driving through a ‘bad neighborhood.’ These words don’t go away quickly, and I will likely forever have to check myself when someone of color walks by my car door.

My father and mother have lived together in Memphis since 1975, and my life has been formed and informed by the backdrop of the city’s landscape and my parents’ stories, along with the history and privileges that inform them both. The landscape and this history are in constant conversation with who I am and who I am *becoming* (Eichstedt, 2001).

While my father wouldn’t phrase his perception this way, he possesses an adept understanding of the history of racism in Memphis and how it continues to plague the social institutions there. As a child, I remember him frequently leading discussions about the functions of race in local and national politics at the dinner table. I knew he worked alongside attorneys, religious leaders, and friends to help create more cross-racial dialogue in a still racially-divided

Memphis and more equitable experiences for people of color in the city. He partnered with the African-American pastor of a downtown Memphis church to create more cross-racial dialogue, collaboration, and friendship between our church and theirs within a very racially-divided Christian community. He stood up for an African-American attorney who wasn't promoted to partner and suffered professionally for it. I knew that what he did made our family 'different' from many of my classmates' upper middle-class, southern families. However, I also knew the limitations of Memphis's African-American communities' support, some of whom had termed my father a 'racist' for running against a long-term, African-American school board leader. Similarly, my mother is one of the smartest women I know and a bottomless source of love. She has a passionate commitment to accepting all people exactly as they are and continues to challenge those closest to her to see the racist assumptions of their upbringing. Both my mother and father have continuously committed themselves to a reflective life. For all of these things, I will be forever grateful.

However, I am a product of my place and, as a White person, I am implicated in racist relations with people of color. While the functions of racism were always a prominent topic in my family, I didn't possess an understanding of my racial, socioeconomic, religious, and sexual privilege. I thought that racism only consisted of the visible acts of prejudice towards individuals of color. While this is racism, I didn't know that it relied on a set of privileges based on skin color that I had inherited and continue to benefit from. I didn't understand how this privilege functioned, and how it continues to construct and reproduce institutions of racism. I have gotten better at recognizing and naming the whispers of Whiteness that haunt the South ("They're just different," "He's so articulate," "Help them"), but they were and often continue to be the acid rain that surrounds me. As such, this project is both deeply personal and political.

Having been socialized as a White person, I know how spiritually and socially damaging Whiteness is and can be (hooks, 1993; Segrest, 2001). Naming how Whiteness functions is a spiritual practice for me, a difficult ritual that both reminds me of the violence and dehumanization of Whiteness and pushes me to find ways to follow others to dismantle it. Relatedly, but more politically, Whiteness is political work: anti-racist work that exposes how racism operates with the hope of reducing its power (Rasmussen, et. al, 2001).

From a research perspective, my racial location gives me several advantages for examining Whiteness. My socialization as a White person provides me with a critical understanding of how Whiteness is internalized for Whites. As I was raised a White person and experienced (and continue to experience) many of the privileges of being White, I understand how one is socialized into Whiteness and the life-long process of learning more about my privilege from people of color. Relatedly, my Whiteness granted me a certain amount of race-based legitimacy with my White research partners that allowed me to critique and discuss racism under the assumption that I was not personally invested. While this legitimacy is a function of White privilege, I attempt to use this privilege in the service of undermining racism. By naming how White privilege and racism functions, I also attempt to actively resist a Whiteness practice that reproduces inequity through silence.

While my position provided these advantages, my positionality as a White person socialized within a White dominant culture also limits my understanding of racism. I do not position myself as an ‘expert’ on Whiteness (while I understand that by calling this project ‘research’ I do); instead, I hope to use my privilege to follow the work of Whiteness scholars of color to describe and analyze how Whiteness was produced through discourse in this particular context around one exilic Iranian text. I hope that it offers opportunities for introducing and

using alternative methodologies and discourses that de-construct the Whiteness that perpetuates local, national, and global institutions of discrimination and racism.

Sikhandar

“Maan kay paon talay jannat hai idhar aa jao

The paradise is under the feet of the mother. So come into her fold.”

-poet, Habib Jalib

In the late 1970s, my American paternal grandmother divorced my biological grandfather, moved to Bahrain, and married a Pakistani man twenty-five years her junior. This marriage was rejected by my grandmother’s four children- one of whom was my father. It was decided that my sister and I would only know this ‘other grandfather’ through letters sent by mail and the stories shared by my grandmother. The following autoethnography is both a documentation of these stories and an imagined history of this ‘other grandfather’ that I never knew.

1

“Chotu! [You little squirt!]” Shazia yelled angrily as she ran into the house. She stopped at the front entrance as her sisters Husna and Fareeda quickly followed with sticks in their hands:

“Sika! Come back here!”

Shazia paused to take a breath and wipe the sweat off the back of her neck. It was only May, but the city of Gujranwala was already brimming with its summer heat. All of the Chaudhri girls were already wearing their summer suits, but the heat still felt excruciating. Before long, the girls would have to spend most of their days in doors.

“Oh, I *hate* when he does this,” Shazia sighed. “You two go look in the boys’ bedroom and I’ll go look in the kitchen!”

As the girls left to follow their sister’s directions, the heels of their new shoes slapped against the clay, tiled floors of the house. It was the day after Eid-ul-Fitr and she and her younger sisters had

decided to secretly wear their new *khussas* outside to play that day. If their mother found out, she would slap them.

“Don’t forget to look under the *charpoys* [beds] and in the closet!” Shazia whispered as she passed the boys’ room on the way to the kitchen. She smiled as she heard Fareeda mumble from underneath the bed, “Sika, when I find you, you’re going to be sorry!”

“What’s going on here?” Her mother said sternly from the doorway of the kitchen.

Shazia stopped. Her smile quickly transformed to disgrace. She was already thirteen- *practically a woman*- but the intimidating looks of her mother still shamed her. Fatima, her oldest sister, was standing behind her with pen and paper in hand.

“Fatima and I were just starting a letter to your brothers when I heard the Heaven’s falling down. Explain yourself.”

Husna and Fareeda had stopped their search and were standing fearfully in the corner of the hallway. As the oldest of the three younger sisters, Shazia knew that it was her responsibility to explain. She looked embarrassedly at the floor and confessed, “We were looking for Sikander.” She looked up imploringly, hoping for her mother’s forgiveness: “We’re sorry.” Husna interrupted and tried to explain: “But, *Ammi* [*Mom*], we were outside playing *Gilli-danda*³ with the neighbors and Sika stole our *danda* from us. It’s not fair!”

Shazia shook her head at Husna in an attempt to interrupt her sister’s futile plea.

“Now, why did he do that?” *Ammi* asked as she shifted her hands to her hips.

All of the girls hesitated. They knew that their mother hated for them to exclude Sikander from their games. Especially the day after a Holy day.

“*Ammi*, he’s too little!” Fareeda cried, “It’s no fun when he plays with us!”

³ Gilli-danda is a children’s game played in Pakistan, said to have preceded cricket. The game consists of hitting a small wooden stick (the *danda*) as far as one can with a larger wooden stick (the *gilli*).

“*Haram Aleik! [Shame on you!]*” their mother quickly fired back. “He is your brother. *Allah yusa’amah! [May God forgive you!]* Now, go back outside and find something else to play.”

She shook her head as she walked back to the kitchen with Fatima. “Oh, and take those good *khussas* off!” she yelled. “I don’t want to see you outside in those again.”

All three girls shuffled back to their bedroom. No more *khussas*. No more *Gilli-danda*. “Stupid, Sika!” Husna muttered. “He always gets us in trouble!”

2

Sikander giggled to himself as he heard his sisters walk away. Thanks to his sisters’ charade, he had managed to climb in the kitchen window undetected and hide under the small kitchen table.

They will never get their danda now, he thought as he waved the small wooden stick in his hand.

They should have let me play with them. He stuck out his tongue at them for good measure.

Some might say that my grandfather Sikander was a mischievous child. As the first son of his father’s younger, supposedly beautiful second wife, some might even say that he had been horribly spoiled. But, I imagine that he would say that he was both. Or even more so, that he was a man who always knew he loved the game.

Twenty years later, I imagine him telling my grandmother over dinner that if he had been able to support his family as a professional cricket player in Pakistan, he would have kept playing.

But he couldn’t.

3

“So why did we never meet him?” I ask my mother, as we sit on her khaki-colored couch in my childhood home.

“Alex?” She asked, frowning.

“Yea, why did we never meet him?”

“Well, he came to Memphis once, shortly after he and Grandmother had gotten married. On one of her visits, I welcomed him into my home, just like I would anyone else. But, he was very rude. When your dad came home from work, he started reading the newspaper, and Alex started insulting your father and telling him that it was rude,” she explained and paused to look up at me.

“And you know me, I won’t tolerate someone disrespecting your father, especially in our home after we had been hospitable to him,” she continued.

I nodded. I knew her male protectionism--a southern trait learned by many southern women--well.

“So, we asked that she come alone next time she visit. And, he never came back,” she said happily and with confidence.

“I don’t think you girls missed anything.”

4

“OK, Now where were we?” Fariha asked as she returned to stirring the *keema*.

A smoke of lamb, goat curry, peas, and potatoes lifted from the *karahi* as Fatima re-read the letter to her mother:

“My sons, Amar and Amin,

Thank you for your long letter. You know how much we look forward to hearing from you every month. We are so glad that all is going well with the business. It truly sounds like the United States is the land of dreams that you thought it would be.

It is very hot in Gujranwala and we think that the monsoon will be very bad this year. Your father has still not been able to find work, so we appreciate the money that you are able to send...”

Fariha lifted the *keema* up to her lips as she listened.

“That’s it so far,” Fatima said.

“What else do we need to write?” Fariha asked nonchalantly as she added a palmful of salt and stirred again.

“Mother, we need to respond to his question,” Fatima responded insistently, “about coming to be with him.”

Fariha turned around and took a seat at the dining room table, “Right.”

“Have you talked to Father?” Fatima asked reluctantly.

Fariha took a deep breath and wiped her hands on the dirtied kitchen cloth, “I have. And he doesn’t want to come.”

“Well, why not?”

“This is his home, he says. He doesn’t want to leave.”

Both women sat in silence as the *karahi* bubbled behind them.

4

In 1965, when Alex was ten, the eldest son of his father’s first wife came to Gujranwala and took their mother and sisters with them back to the United States. At the time, few Pakistani

immigrants had been allowed to immigrate to the U.S. Only 2,500 Pakistani immigrants had been allowed to enter US soil within the past twenty years. However, with the passing of the INS Act of 1965, per-country immigration quotas were eliminated and immigration from Pakistan to the US increased.

My grandfather, his mother, and the rest of her children were either left behind or chose to stay in Gujranwala. Everyone knew that the American money would stop once Fariha and her children were all in the United States. Families rarely sent money back for the children of the second wife. So, my grandfather knew at the age of ten that it would be his responsibility to support his mother and two younger sisters. At the age of seventeen, he left Pakistan in an attempt to find work. For three years, he worked in Germany performing odd jobs- like cleaning the windows of high-rise buildings- and sent money home to his father. In his third year, his undocumented status was discovered and he was deported. With the help of an uncle, he later received a Guest Worker visa from Bahrain where he worked as a construction foreman during the day.

At night, he would play cricket.

5

“Dear Kate,

How did we meet?

One evening, the elementary school principal brought Alex over and introduced him to the teachers. It happened that there was an empty chair next to me and Alex sat there. Most of the evening Alex (he wasn't ‘Americanized’ then and went by his real name, Sikander) talked of the hugely important cricket game the next day. Sikander played for Cable and Wireless and they

would meet the league champions, BCC, the next day. Although they were decided underdogs, he was hopeful.

I was a very good listener although I quickly told him I knew nothing of cricket. Finally, he said he just couldn't explain cricket completely; I should see a match. I agreed that I would like to, and he said if I would pick him up the next morning, we could drive to the match.

I agreed and that Friday we drove out to a bare field leased by Cable and Wireless. Most of the players for both sides were Indian or Pakistani. I sat with the wife of a British player and she explained the game while keeping the official score. It was a close game which Sikander's team won, and after the match the players on his team thanked me for coming, as I had brought them luck and a victory.

This became my regular Friday entertainment, and Sikander and I fell into a pattern of having dinner after the match in which he dissected the game, celebrating successful plays and deploring mistakes. For a long time, our mutual interest was simply cricket. I grew to like him very much, but in his culture, dating was a foreign and undesirable concept and I am sure he never thought of our after-match dinners as dates.

Gradually our conversations grew to include religion and culture. On many basic questions, we thrashed out considerable agreement, and I know we both enjoyed and grew from the discussions. Around this time I finally moved into an apartment and I invited him over for dinner. I had a beef roast, with potatoes and vegetables – a meal I had served many times to family. Sikander was polite, but made little comment until I finally asked how he liked it.

He thanked me, and said he appreciated the meal. I said, "But what?"

"Well," he said, "it just doesn't have much taste."

I said, “This is American food, so it tastes like American food. We don’t use spices like you do in Pakistan.” He agreed, but the final word was: “It doesn’t have much taste.” So, I challenged him to do better, and he said he would make the next meal. Which he did and very well.

Our relationship remained purely platonic but was clearly growing closer. We never discussed feelings but we did discuss almost everything else from religion to articles in the latest *Time* magazine. We carefully avoided touching except for accidental brushing past one another in my narrow kitchen.

Then sometime in the spring, as he was leaving my apartment after dinner, he stopped by the door, apparently grappling with a decision. Then suddenly he kissed me, and we had jumped into deep water.

For him, marriage was the only approved relationship between a man and woman so he quickly proposed that we marry. I saw many objections, and colleagues felt that it was best to just enjoy a relationship and leave it behind as a pleasant interval when one left Bahrain. Which several of them were doing. I went back and forth but felt that devalued the respect I had for him.

We married on June 9, 1977 in the Embassy, after counseling by the ambassador who was commissioned to determine if this was a genuine relationship or a marriage-for-visa deal. He gave his approval. The elementary principal who introduced us was his best man and other teachers attended.

That is enough for today.

Love,

Grandmother”

Thirteen years after meeting, my grandmother returned to the US. Sikhander came to the United States with her and they started a restaurant together in the Mid-West. “Where are you from?” people would ask him. He would simply respond: “I am an American.” But, at night, as they cooked curry and listened to Nazia Hasan, he would tell my grandmother how much it offended him. Even more so if they had called him an Arab.

I never met this ‘other grandfather’ that my parents never called by that name. He was always referred to as “Alex.” My grandmother would tell me later that he had always wanted to meet us, and loved to learn about us through letters and pictures.

My mother and father met Sikhander once. My angel of a mother told me that he was “very rude” and “arrogant.” She said that he had critiqued my father for reading the newspaper in his presence. My mother said: “I wouldn’t stand for a guest in their home to disrespect your father like that.” So, he was never allowed to return. Years later, my grandmother explained to me: “If I had been able to have children, we would still be married and blissfully happy.” But she couldn’t share him.

CHAPTER 4: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

For this dissertation, I draw upon two, complimentary frameworks to examine the discourses that were evoked and produced during the two classroom literacy events around Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*. The first framework is sociocultural theories of literacy, which aim to name how power and privilege operate within literacy practices and literacy events. The second, related framework, a subset of Critical Race Theory called Critical Whiteness Studies, is intended to center my examination on making visible and disrupting the discursive productions of Whiteness around *Persepolis*. I begin by describing a sociocultural theory of literacy framework and then follow with a discussion of how I will use critical Whiteness theory.

Sociocultural Theories of Literacy

Sociocultural theories of literacy, sometimes referred to as “the New Literacy Studies” (Gee, 2000), emphasize that literacy is more than a set of autonomous cognitive and linguistic skills. It is a set of social and contextual practices situated within evolving social, cultural, and political processes (Street, 1985). Sociocultural theories of literacy build upon theories that language is always shaped by cultural and social contexts (Bakhtin, 1986). According to Gee (1996), language “always comes fully attached to ‘other stuff’: to social relations, cultural models, power and politics, perspectives on experience, values and attitudes, as well as things and places in the world” (p. vii). Sociocultural theorists of literacy use sociocultural theories of language to critique *autonomous* models of literacy, which situate reading and writing as ‘natural’ and universally valuable, and propose an *ideological* model of literacy, which frames

literacy as a social practice that is always situated in a particular world-view (Bensier and Street, 1994; Gee, 1990) and socially-constructed epistemologies, or ways in which people conceive of “knowledge, identity, and being” (Street, 2012, p. 29). As Street (2003) explains:

“The [autonomous] model...disguises the cultural and ideological assumptions that underpin it so that it can then be presented as though they are neutral and universal and that literacy as such will have these benign effects. Research in NLS challenges this view and suggests that in practice literacy varies from one context to another and from one culture to another and so, therefore, do the effects of the different literacies in different conditions. The autonomous approach is simply imposing western conceptions of literacy on to other cultures or within a country those of one class or cultural group onto others.” (p. 77)

An ideological model of literacy highlights the ways in which language interacts with social systems and cultural practices (Heath, 1983; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1984). It emphasizes the ways in which language is *used* differently for unique purposes in specific social and cultural contexts. It also highlights the ways in which literacy functions within and perpetuates certain ways of knowing and doing aligned with dominant power structures. This framework critiques the ways in which language and literacy are patterned within schools and the English classroom, yielding to a growing amount of fruitful work related to students’ out-of-school literacies.

However, it also provides researchers with a framework for understanding students’ in-school literacy practices, particularly those that take place in the English classroom (Dillon, 1989; Hinchman & Zalewski, 1996; Moje, 1996; Stewart, 1989; Sturtevant, 1992). In the following pages, I summarize influential concepts in sociocultural theories of literacy that inform the conceptualization, design, and methodology of this study.

Literacy events and literacy practices

In order to explain the power negotiations involved in reading and writing, Street (1988) relies on two concepts: literacy events and literacy practices. Street uses Shirley Brice Heath's (1982) definition of *literacy events* as "any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of participants' interactions and their interpretive processes" (p. 93). Within sociocultural theories of literacy, *literacy events* refer to specific, observable events in which written texts are used. Various literacy events take place in the high school English classroom, some 'sanctioned' others 'unsanctioned' (Alvermann, 1999). Sanctioned literacy events include reading literature, writing essays, or reading tests: any occasion when writing is being used in ways permitted by the institutional framework of the classroom. Unsanctioned literacy events, on the other hand, might include the texting of a friend, the writing of a note, writing another class's homework, or using one's phone to write an e-mail or a social media post. Unsanctioned literacy events provide rich information about the stances students take in school (Guzzetti et al, 2004) and the types of literacies salient to students' lives (Hagood, 2000). This study will examine both sanctioned and unsanctioned literacy events surrounding the classroom readings of a text set in the Middle East.

Sociocultural theories of literacy also recognize the ways in which literacy events often contain "nested" literacy events that may help contextualize a larger literacy event. Barton and Hamilton describe how chains of discrete literacy events are often nested with one another and can be used to better understand a "meaningful" literacy event:

Ariel signs in, checks her mail, ignores some phone messages, logs on. These events may overlap but there is clear signaling of the beginning and end of each one. Each literacy event is nested and can be broken down into a set of smaller activities like

reading from a screen, entering a number on a form, signing a document. These go together to make up the meaningful event (p. 3).

In my research, I will define the literacy event surrounding the Middle Eastern text as the “meaningful” literacy event; however, I will examine other discrete literacy events nested within this larger literacy event, like students’ conversations about the text, students’ formal and informal writing, and students’ conversations about their writing, to better understand the tacit rules and demands that shape such events and ultimately inform available interpretations within a particular social context.

Literacy practices refer to *genres* of actions involving written texts. Barton & Hamilton (2000) define literacy practices as “the general cultural way of utilising written language which people draw upon in their lives” (p. 7). For example, when one writes a grocery list, one is participating in a literacy *event*, while “the writing of grocery lists” is a broader literacy *practice* that functions as a genre of “what people do with literacy” (Barton & Hamilton, 2000).

However, sociocultural theories of literacy stress that literacy practices are not observable units of behavior because they also involve “the socially situated beliefs, values, and purposes that shape how and why people use literacy” (Barton, 1991; Street, 1984). As Barton and Hamilton (2000) differentiates, “Events are observable episodes which arise from practices and are shaped by them.” (p. 8). Literacy practices include people’s abstract awareness of literacy, how people make sense of literacy, and the shared cognitions represented in ideologies (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). The concept of *literacy practices* is helpful in conceptualizing my study because the event of interest, and the literacy events nested within it, will be informed by broader, institutionalized literacy practices shaped by beliefs, values, and purposes surrounding schooling, the learning of English, the role of the student, and the role of the text.

Reader, Text, Context

An overarching framework of reader, text, and context will inform my understanding of what happens during classroom literacy events. Below, I provide a short synopsis of the aspects of reader, text, and context that will inform this study's examination of discourse during a literacy event revolving around a Middle Eastern text.

Identity: Situating the Reader

Classroom interactions act as a significant site of identity construction (Bloome & Egan-Robertson, 1993; Gutierrez, Rymes, and Larson, 1995; Leander 2002). Readers bring a diversity of lived experiences to the texts that they read, and these experiences shape the meanings that they make within the classroom. The meanings made from a text, in turn, offers a representation of their identity as an experience that they can accommodate or resist (Luke, 1995-1996). Drawing from the work of Dorothy Holland (1998) and James Gee (2000), I will examine classroom readings as a space of practice through which the individual is produced. Below, I have highlighted the difference between Meadian and Ericksonian theories of identity and how sociocultural theories of identity, as highlighted in the work of Holland and Gee, build upon Mead to describe how identities are produced through classroom readings.

Meadian theories of identity highlight the ways individuals' understanding of themselves is formed dialogically in relation to their environment, their world, and textual objects. These theories emphasize the ways an individual's conception of himself or herself, or identity, is not a pre-existing structure that needs to be discovered; instead, Mead emphasizes the dialogical nature of identity as it is constructed in an individual's interaction with others and the world. Mead's theories of identity highlight the ways in which a student's understanding of themselves

and their world is influenced by their experiences and engagements with the world, including those with texts.

Traditional notions of “identity” as a single, unified self frequently stem from the writings of psychoanalyst Erik Erickson. In his text, *Identity: Youth in Crisis* (1968) Erikson defines identity as a “sense, felt by individuals within themselves, and as an experience of continuity, oriented toward a self-chosen and positively anticipated future” (Penuel and Wertsh, 1995). For Erickson, ‘identity’ is a coherent, unified self, developed through a series of individual ‘crisis’ stages, ranging from infancy to late adulthood. These stages of identity answer questions about who one is as a member of a cultural group that makes up his or her society. While Erickson’s framework of identity is useful in understanding how individuals locate themselves in society, it fails to account for the multiple ways in which an individual defines themselves through the multiple roles or positions that they inhabit, e.g. as a stylish dresser, a good mother, a philosophical thinker, a moderate Democrat, or an Arab American girl.

Meadian theories of identity highlight the ways individual identity is formed dialogically in relation with their environment, their world, and textual objects. Unlike Erickson, Mead (1912, 1913, 1934) proposes that an individual’s notion of oneself is plural and intimately tied to language. While Mead does not employ the term ‘identity’ -- rather he uses the term *self* -- he articulates how one’s notion of oneself is formed by the language of others within particular social contexts. Drawing upon Hegelian philosophical theory, he constructs a dynamic “I-me” system to describe how an individual’s notion of oneself is constructed through social interaction and internalized self-other dialogues. To put his theory simply, Mead perceives that each individual is born into a social environment as a *subject*, an active, responsive ‘I’ that lacks self consciousness. As the individual learns about his or her environment, others construct

perceptions of them that situate the individual as an object, or as an *other*. Through ‘gestures’ reflected off of significant others, the individual becomes aware of these perceptions and develops a ‘me,’ which Mead defines as the collection of perceptions that one believes others have about them. With the formation of the ‘me,’ the individual objectifies the self as *other*, and through a reflexive process between the *object* ‘Me’ and *subject* ‘I,’ the individual “turn[s] back the experience of the individual upon himself” and “adjusts” his or her actions in social contexts (Mead, 1934, p. 134). In other words, Mead proposes that we develop a sense of ourselves when we become an object to ourselves through the words or gestures of others and that through this objectification we are able to represent ourselves to ourselves from the perspective of others. We internalize the responses of others and experience our own behavior as they are read by others, symbols for who we are. As a consequence, we begin to see and evaluate our behavior, and by association ourselves, in relation to the meanings and values of those around us, or the social group that we are a part of. Meadian theories of identity emphasize the ways in which an individual’s conception of himself or herself, or identity, is not a pre-existing structure that needs to be discovered; instead, identities are multiple and plural and are constructed in daily interaction with others and the world.

Sociocultural theorists like Dorothy Holland, et al. (2001) build upon a Meadian framework of identity to understand the ways in which individuals “self-make” or form self-identities in relationship to social roles, statuses, and persona and how these social identities influence an individual’s behavior and interpretations of the world. Using the dialogic framework of Meadian identity formation informed by Vygotsky’s activity theory, Holland et al. highlight that self-understanding is always formed in relation to a figured world of social life:

“‘An alcoholic,’ ‘a father,’ and ‘a judge’ are all particular answers to the question ‘Who am I?’...where the implicit condition is ‘relative to such and such a social world’” (p. 68).

A figured world is defined as “a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others” (p. 52). Participation in a figured world could be read as adopting or resisting a particular discourse and one’s status within that figured world is dependent on how well one enacts that discourse. The English classroom is an example of figured world. For example, if one were to ask a group of people, “What is an English class?” there would be commonalities in their answers: They would describe a gathering of students and a teacher in a school. The students and teacher would likely be reading or responding to a text or developing a piece of writing. A successful student within this figured world would be able to perform particular types of tasks, while a less successful student would resist or be unable to perform these tasks. During this project, my research participants encountered and functioned within multiple figured worlds simultaneously. While I do not name the figured worlds of my research participants in the findings, I paid close attention to how the participants’ figured worlds inform their readings and responses to the texts of interest.

Gee (1996) also provides a framework for understanding how a students’ use of a text is influenced by their socially situated identity. Gee (2000), like Holland, describes identity as "Being recognized as a certain 'kind of person,' in a given context... all people have multiple identities connected not to their 'internal states' but to their performances in society" (99). Gee argues that the ways in which a student approaches a text and the meanings that a student makes with peers and teachers around a text is influenced by students’ perceptions of themselves and the ways that they desire to be perceived by others.

Gee (2001) outlines four ways in which one can be a "certain kind of person": the nature-identity (N-Identities), the institution-identity (I-Identities), discourse-identity (D-Identities), and affinity-identity (A-Identities). N-Identities refer to characteristics perceived to be received from birth, like height, gender, and skin color. The meanings assigned to these N-identities are dependent on the recognition of others and are influenced by broader social and cultural concepts. Within this study, students might identify with or assign a variety of N-identities to themselves, their classmates, their teacher, and characters in their books. I-Identities are aspects of identity defined by or authorized by authorities within institutions. The identity of "student" and "teacher" are two I-Identities that will be salient in this study; however, I-Identities related to markers of race, nationality, religion, and language use will also emerge. D-Identities are identities defined by descriptors used to describe an individual. In this study, there might be a student who has a D-Identity as a "good reader" while others might have a D-Identity as a "poor reader." Lastly, students in the class could be a part of an affinity group, such as the soccer team, and therefore possess various A-identities that mark them as members of a particular group. Gee emphasizes that these four types of identity overlap in various ways and a student can fill multiple identities within social contexts, including conflicting ones.

Gee (1996) explains that people enact these identities through Discourses, or ways of interacting and speaking that identify themselves with particular social groups and situate others outside or within these groups. Gee (2008) defines Discourses as:

[D]istinctive ways of speaking/listening and often, too, writing/reading *coupled* with distinctive ways of acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, dressing, thinking, believing, with other people and with various objects, tools, and technologies, so as to enact specific

socially recognizable identities engaged in specific socially recognizable activities. (p. 155, original emphasis)

Gee's concept of Discourse and the ways in which it is enacted and formed through subject positionings plays a seminal role in the conceptualizing of this project.

Texts

The study of a literacy event is partly the study of texts and how they are produced or used (Barton and Hamilton, 2000). Below, I have addressed the ways in which texts are historically positioned within institutionalized high school English practices and the relationship between the text, context, and the reader. Barton and Hamilton write that classroom readings of texts are “shaped by the social rules which regulate the use and distribution of texts” (p. 7). Text selection in the high school English classroom is most frequently governed by what is considered to be “good literature.” The Formalists, a group of literary scholars who applied systematic linguistic study to written text, defined *literature* as a form of written communication based on its difference- or what the Formalists referred to as the *deformation*- from “ordinary language.” Under the influence of “devices,” such as imagery, rhyme, meter, diction, syntax and others, literary language was believed to make ordinary language “strange” thereby making the world seem unfamiliar. Through this ‘estrangement,’ literature was believed to encourage a reader’s increased attention to language and promote new ways of seeing (Eagleton, 1983). For this reason, literature was thought to be an ‘elevated’ form of writing that could be read to achieve ‘transcendent’ forms of thought.

The Formalists are merely one group of scholars who attempted to develop a universal definition of literature as a means of differentiating and categorizing written texts. Literature has been defined in a variety of ways over the course of history: as written texts with themes of

“timeless human virtues,” writing that has “historical authority,” or texts that follow certain linguistic structures (Habib, 2005; Kennedy, 2000; Mohanty, 1997). Over the course of time, each of these definitions of literature has been problematized. However, the concept has remained: there are particular written texts that are more valuable, more deserving of reading, than others. In the West, these texts are called ‘the literary canon.’ They are a collection of written texts, or literature, that have been deemed “influential in shaping Western culture” (Ross, 2000; Guillory, 1993; Kolbas, 2001).

What we call “literature” today is often recognized to be a subjective value judgment wrapped up in politics of power. There is no inherent quality or set of qualities of “literature” by which we can develop an objective definition, just as there is no ‘essence’ to literature by which we can systematically categorize written language. Instead, ‘literature’ is agreed to operate more functionally than ontologically; it tells us more about what we do with particular forms of text than about a universal, fixed nature of ‘literature.’ John M. Ellis (1997) proposes that literature operates functionally as any kind of writing that someone values highly. Written text becomes literature based on the subjective esteem and labeling of individuals and communities. However, critical social theorists stress (Apple, 2000; McLaren, 1988) that these subjective value judgments do not operate innocently. As Apple (2000) communicates:

Texts are really messages to and about the future. As part of a curriculum, they participate in no less than the organized knowledge system of society. They participate in creating what a society has recognized as legitimate and truthful. They help set the canons of truthfulness and, as such, also help recreate a major reference point for what knowledge, culture, belief, and morality really *are*. (p. 182)

The term ‘literature’ does not merely reflect an individual’s personal taste, but also communicates the social assumptions that allow certain social groups to maintain power over others. For this reason, the term ‘literature’ reveals less about particular forms of writing and more about the dominant social ideologies of the time.

As a result, texts that have been historically categorized as ‘literature’ are increasingly being re-examined and reinterpreted. Special attention has been given to understanding the ways in which literary texts function as hegemonic tools. Much of the Western ‘literary canon’ has been accused of validating and perpetuating racist, sexist, and heterosexist thought that has oppressed and silenced others (Joyce, 1987; Robinson, 1983; Saldivar, 1991). For this reason, what has historically constituted as literature is slowly losing its influence as unique forms of text that must be taught to all children in all schools.

The selection of texts about or from regions typically associated with the Middle East engages the social and cultural context of text selection in a variety of possible ways. It is possible that a teacher might select a text from the Middle East in an attempt to resist the social rules that typically guide text selection by incorporating a book outside of the canon or is teaching in accordance with an individual motivated by these aims. It is also possible that a teacher might attempt to step outside traditional text selection processes. However, their choices still invoke “hegemonic power relations and interests at work in larger societal ideologies and discourses” (Freebody, Luke, Gilbert, 1991, p. 436). During my research, I will be conscious of the ways in which literary texts are traditionally defined and positioned within the high school English classroom, and how these positionings might inform classroom readings and teachings of Middle Eastern novels.

Sociocultural theories of literacy also require critical examination of the relationship of the text to the reader. While a reader may bring with them particular identities and discourses that inform their readings, the text also constructs a particular subject position or reader position which inform and shape readers' understandings of themselves and of the world (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; New London Group, 1996). Luke (1995/1996) addresses the role and function of the text in this way:

...we can focus on how texts tell the reader how, when, and where to read; how they stipulate a selective version of the world and of 'being' and 'doing' in that world and how they position some readers as inside and outside of, visible and invisible in that world. In the case of spoken texts, like conversations and more formal exchanges, language is used to represent speakers' beliefs, positions, and ideas and to establish and build up social relations and identities. Spoken and written texts, then, are moments in which cultural representations and social relations and identities are articulated through language and other sign systems. (18)

Luke emphasizes that texts are not neutral. They are socioculturally situated and encoded and are therefore constitutive of power relations. Therefore, texts have the power to shape and position readers' understandings of themselves and of the world during the reading interaction (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; New London Group, 1996). This understanding requires that I examine how the text positions the readers in my study and how meaning is constructed by the reader, text, and context.

Context

Freebody, Luke, & Gilbert (1991) argue that "the written and oral discourses of schooling embody a systematic selecting and valorizing of particular practices and an equally systemic

excluding of others” (p. 435). “[I]n literacy events in the classroom--structured interactions around and about texts--” they explain citing Heath, “students learn a selective tradition of how to do things with those texts” (p. 436). How texts, like novels, are used or interpreted is informed by various schooling practices, including what is considered “appropriate reading.” Freebody et al. (1991) argue that reading in elementary and secondary classrooms is part of a selective tradition authorized and institutionalized by “a systematic selecting and valorizing of particular practices and an equally systematic excluding of others”:

..in literacy events in the classroom- structured interactions around and about texts- students learn a selective tradition of how to do things with those texts (cf. Heath, 1981). Displays of these techniques in turn come to count as reading (Baker & Freebody, 1989). At the same time, other ways of handling texts, other kinds of semantic and pragmatic potentials and possibilities are excluded. (p. 436)

Below, I have highlighted three common approaches to reading within the high school English classroom and addressed how these definitions of ‘reading’ will frame the literacy events that I witness. While these three frameworks are not exhaustive of the potential approaches to reading that I might see, they highlight three “ideological” approaches to reading highlighted in sociocultural examinations of reading. (Freebody et al., 1991)

In the early twentieth century, prominent educational theory centered around the individual thinker and his or her isolated mind. At the core of this mode of thinking was the belief that knowledge exists within an individual’s head and instruction involved finding the most effective and efficient ways for students to “acquire” this knowledge (Fodor, 1980; Gardner, 1985; Vera & Simon, 1993). Within this framework, the text was the primary source of meaning and the reader was a passive decoder. The New Critics, including I. A. Richards, F. R. Leavis, John Crowe

Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, and T.S. Eliot, embraced this perspective. They argued that a literary text was a complete, self-sufficient work of art that possessed an objective, verifiable existence independent of the reader. In the high school English classroom, this perspective is often affirmed through various classroom practices, including silent, private reading and questions that address the ‘objective’ meaning of a text. For example, teacher-posed questions like “What is the author’s main point?” or “What does the passage on page 232 mean?” are rooted in these cognitive approaches to reading.

Over the past three decades, educational theory has distanced itself from this “acquisition” model towards a “participation” model that emphasizes the social and contextualized nature of cognition and meaning (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Greeno, 1989, 1997; Hollan, Hutchins, & Kirsch, 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Resnick, 1987; Salomon, 1993). Within this framework, learning is perceived to be a participatory and situated activity constructed among others. Jerome Bruner (1996) summarizes the constructivist thought when he writes that education’s purpose is to “[aid] young humans in learning to use the tools of meaning making and reality construction, to better adapt to the world in which they find themselves and to help in the process of changing it as required” (p. 20). Similarly, contemporary literary theory has increasingly highlighted the ways in which meaning in fiction is not pre-established but is created dialogically between reader, text, and context. These theories highlight the importance of students’ imaginative engagement with fictional texts as a means of creating reading experiences that can yield to a reader’s greater understanding of themselves and their worlds.

Bartlett (1932) was the first to argue that a text’s meaning is not passively received, but rather constructed in the interaction between text and reader. Bartlett challenged the text’s *a priori* meaning and, instead, emphasized an interactive and constructive process of reading.

Later literary theorists, like Rosenblatt and Iser, expounded on Bartlett's theory of reading to acknowledge and account for what happens between a reader and text.

Rosenblatt (1938) stressed the primacy of the reader's experience in the meaning-making of a text with her transactional theory of reading. Influenced by pragmatic philosophers like Dewey, William James, and Pierce, Rosenblatt argues for a 'transactional' theory of reading that allows one "to see together, extensionally and durationally, much that is talked about conventionally as if it were composed of irreconcilable separates"; a framework that recognized reading as an "ongoing process in which the elements or factors [the text and the reader] are...aspects of a total situation, each conditioned by and conditioning the other" (p. 17). Instead of situating the reader and the text as separate elements in the reading process, Rosenblatt emphasizes the ways in which the two co-construct meaning in a particular context. She describes the transaction as "a dynamic to-and-fro relationship... [that]. ...places stress on each reading as a particular event involving a particular reader and a particular text recursively influencing each other under particular circumstances" (p. 292).

Iser (1978) followed Rosenblatt with an aesthetic contemplation of the "dynamic interaction between text and reader" that situated meaning not as a "third thing" but as inextricable from the lived experience of reading (p. 107). Iser outlines that a literary text contains 'gaps' or blanks: thoughts left out, motives unexplained, feelings unexpressed. Within this space of indeterminacy, the reader is responsible for 'filling in the gaps,' or making interpretations consistent with the rest of the text and their knowledge of the world. When the reader fills these gaps, the reader's imagination is engaged, a "kaleidoscope of perspectives, preintentions, recollections" that engage with 'retentions' (of the past) and 'protensions' (of the future) and are placed in conversation with the written text in order to create a textual

reality: “The unsaid comes to life in the reader’s imagination” (1676). Once this gap is bridged, the text is no longer an object but a participant in the experience of meaning-making alongside the reader. Iser explains:

“Such a meaning must clearly be the product of an interaction between the textual signals and the reader’s act of comprehension. And, equally clearly, the reader cannot detach himself from such an interaction; on the contrary, the activity stimulated in him will link him to the text and induce him to create the conditions necessary for the effectiveness of that text. As text and reader thus merge into a single situation, the division between subject and object no longer applies, and it therefore follows that meaning is no longer an object to be defined, but is an effect to be experienced.” (p. 10)

By diffusing the subject and the object through this coming together of text and imagination, Iser purports that reading allows for the construction of a “virtual dimension” in which the reader’s ‘present’ is transformed. Through a process of anticipation and retrospection in which a reader reacts to what they have produced, a virtual dimension is formed which transforms the text into an experience for the reader. He describes this process as an entanglement that overtakes a reader’s preconceptions and allows the text to become the individual’s present. It is for this reason, Iser states that readers often feel that they are living another life as they read.

This shift in literary theory, often called reader response theory, argues that textual meaning is constructed dialogically between the written words of the author and the experiences and understanding of the reader. This dialogical framework challenges previous conceptions of the text as an object with pre-existing meaning and the pedagogical practices that teach fictional literature as such. Instead, contemporary literary and fiction theory suggest that the English classroom must create opportunities for the imaginative construction of textual worlds and

experiences during the reading of fiction that allow readers the interpretive opportunities to make meaning of themselves and their worlds. In the high school English classroom, one can see a reader response approach manifested in teacher-posed questions or discussions that encourage the incorporation of personal perspectives, attitudes, opinions, and interpretations. Questions like, “What are your feelings after reading the opening passage of the book?” or “What connections are there between the book and your life?” encourage students to acknowledge or vocalize the dialectical relationship between the reader and a text, as espoused by the reader-response framework. Classroom discussions around such questions are increasingly used as a means of sharing personal responses and constructing multiple understandings of a text.

However, teacher-posed questions that encourage students’ personal responses to a text do not always reflect a different attitude or positioning of the text (Tomkins, 1980). Frequently, questions that encourage students to share their personal responses to a text are merely used to encourage student engagement for the purpose of ‘understanding’ a single-assigned textual meaning. A teacher studying *The House on Mango Street*, for example, might ask their students to first share their impressions of a passage in line with a reader response framework, but in a subsequent question, ask the students to share what the passage ‘means,’ operating from a cognitive, ‘objective’ perspective.

Critical literacy is a relatively new theory and pedagogy that seeks to understand and interrogate how power operates in and through texts, helping students identify and interrogate the social structures that sustain social inequalities (Edelskey, 2001; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Rogers, 2002). Critical literacy theorists pay close attention to how ideologies are constructed and read in text, and how texts sustain existing power relationships (Apple, 1993; Edelsky, 1999; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). Critical literacy teaching involves the learning of skills that allow

students to critically examine ideologies and power structures in texts. Students also are taught to recognize how the context of a reading situation can shape the meanings made from a text and students' literacy practices and possibilities (Larson, 2003; Leander, 2002).

As I enter the field, it is important to recognize how these three approaches to reading within the high school English classroom will frame the literacy events that I witness.

Reader, text, context

The process of meaning making around a text within a classroom context occurs as both an individual and social process. While a reader uses his or her identity to make meaning from a text, this personal meaning is also negotiated within and mediated by the social context of the classroom, the discourse of the teacher, and the interaction between teachers and students. In this section, I have highlighted how the relationships between the reader, text, and context will inform my study of classroom discourse around novels set in regions traditionally associated with the Middle East.

Whiteness

The study of Whiteness in the United States is not a new phenomenon. Intellectuals and artists of color have long studied, in the words of Langston Hughes, "the ways of White folks." Whiteness theory examines and attempts to expose institutionalized systems of power, including economic, political, social, and cultural structures, actions, and beliefs, that perpetuate an unequal hierarchy of power distributed between White people and people of color (DiAngela, 2006; Hilliard, 1992). It works from the premise that race is not a discrete, biological property but instead is a social construction that has become a powerful organizing principle around the world (Brodin, 1998; Dyer, 1997; Fine, 1997; Omi & Winant, 1989; Sleeter, 1993; Van Dijk, 1993). It also assumes "White skin privilege," where Whiteness both represents and supports a

variety of social, political, and economic advantages in the United States and elsewhere.

Whiteness theory intends to highlight two interrelated components missing in most efforts that address inequity: the existence of privilege and how it shapes those who hold it and the defining relationships between privileged and marginalized groups (Dyer, 1997; Frankenberg, 1997; McIntosh, 1988; Morrison, 1992; Powell, 1997; Tatum, 1997). DiAngelo (2006) explains:

“By focusing primarily on the academic performance of students of color and ignoring the defining relationship between that performance and the production of Whiteness in the classroom, racism is externalized. This approach reinforces the ‘otherness’ of difference and leaves the operation of power neutralized, unquestioned and intact” (p. 214).

Levine-Rasky (2000) recommends a revised approach that “.. .shifts to the discourse, the culture, the structures, the mechanisms, and the social relations of Whiteness that produce racialized subjects including Whites” (p. 271).

Frankenberg (1993) defines Whiteness as a complex set of locations that creates, authorizes, and maintains racist relations:

“Whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a ‘standpoint,’ a place from which White people look at ourselves, at others, and at society. Third, ‘Whiteness’ refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed” (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 1)

As such, Whiteness is both “empty,” in that it is normalized and typically ‘invisible,’ and “full” or content-laden, in that it generates norms or ways of conceptualizing the world, oneself, and others, regardless of where one is positioned relationally (DiAngela, 2006; Dyer, 1997; Frankenberg, 2001).

While Whiteness is invoked through a variety of discourses, one that is frequently examined is the discourse of “universalism.” The ideology of Whiteness teaches Whites that their perspective is objective and representative of reality. Within this construction, Whites purport that only people of color have racialized experiences—a concept that blinds Whites from thinking about Whiteness as an identity that influences one’s life and perceptions. As DiAngelo (2006) writes: “The belief in objectivity, coupled with positioning White people as outside of culture (and thus the norm for humanity) allow Whites to view themselves as universal humans who can represent all of human experience” (p. 216). When Whiteness or white people are viewed as “noncultural” or “cultureless,” a universal reference point is assumed.

Similarly, Whites are also taught to see themselves as individuals instead of a racially socialized group (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; DiAngelo, 2006; McIntosh, 1988). Discourses of “individualism” problematically erase history and mask how wealth has been accumulated and distributed to benefit Whites. It also allows Whites to distance themselves from the actions of their racial group and demand to be given “the benefit of the doubt” as unique individuals whose identities are uninformed by their racial group.

As this project plays close attention to how whiteness was invoked and produced around an Iranian text, and offers implications for global education integration, it is also important to recognize how Whiteness has functioned and continues to function globally.

Global White Supremacy

In the United States, the term “white supremacy” conjures up images of an American past that used the term to validate and perpetuate race hatred within the United States (Allen, 2001; Wills, 2004) or the relatively small number of race hate groups (Bush, 2004; Delgado & Stefancie, 1997). While critical race theorists include these extreme and relatively common (but

still dangerous) positions and movements in their definition of ‘white supremacy’ (Bush, 2004; Delgado & Stefancie, 1997), they propose a definition that situates white supremacy as an active system, or a set of systems, that saturate the policies and practices that shape the world in the interests of white people:

“[By] ‘white supremacy’ I do not mean to allude only to the self-conscious racism of white supremacist hate groups. I refer instead to a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings” (Ansley, 1997: 592).

In order to understand how white supremacy functions and is perpetuated around Middle Eastern literature like *Persepolis* in the English classroom, it is important to understand the history of white supremacy and how it continues to operate on a global level.

Omi and Winant (1994) and many others attribute “the rise of Europe” and the subsequent European expansion as the original racial “big bang,” or the source of the present racialized world. Drawing from the work of Omi and Winant, Mills (2003) writes, “White supremacy as a system, or a set of systems, clearly came into existence through European expansion and the imposition of European rule through settlement and colonialism on original and imported slave populations” (p. 37).

Theorists have posed a variety of hypotheses for why this domination took on a racialized form. Scholars who are ascribed a more “idealist” orientation attribute the racialization that became an essential tool and justification for colonization to the role of culture, cultural symbolism, and religious predispositions (Jennings, 1976 referenced in Mills, 2003; Jordan,

1977). Others, from a more “Materialist” orientation, describe race as a “convenient superstructural rationale” for domination (Cox, 1948; Fields, 1990, referenced in Mills, 2003). In spite of the conflicted opinions of the racialization of this domination, the authority of the Enlightenment (Bhabha, 1991; Featherstone, 1995) and scientism discourses (Freire and Macedo, 1996, 2000; Kincheloe, et. al, 1996) (frequently a combination of the two along with others) were used to further construct race as biological and natural. These racialized discourses inspired and were used to validate European imperialist and colonial projects, including: the British colonization of Northern America, modern day Palestine, Iraq, Egypt, Jordan, Bahrain, Qatar, Yemen, Sudan, and UAE, India, Australia, South Africa, Sudan, Hong Kong, Nigeria, contemporary Zimbabwe, areas in West Africa (including contemporary Gambia, Nigeria, and Ghana), the Caribbean, the Spanish and Portugese empires in the Americas, the Philippines, parts of Morocco, modern-day Mozambique, and south Asia, the French occupation of Algeria, Morocco, parts of West Africa, Madagascar, Syria, and Indiochina, German settlement of parts of East and West Africa, Dutch settlement in Indonesia and southern Africa, Belgium occupation of the Congo, Italian occupation of Libya, and the contested competition for these areas among the abovementioned countries. Saïd (1978) writes that Western colonial expansion relied upon and promulgated “rigid dichotomies of racial/ethnic difference” (referenced in Holmlund, 1992). However, despite these “rigid” differences, what was defined as “white” or “non-white” within these colonizing and colonized regions consistently changed, emphasizing the socially-constructed and often arbitrary nature of the racialized categories. For example, Jacobson (1998) identifies “three great epochs” in US law and history that narrate how groups once recognized as distinct races (Hebrews, Celts, and Mediterraneans, for example) became White (Brodin, 1999; Ignatiev, 1996). Recent scholars have noted how Arab-Americans, originally categorized as

White during early phases of immigration, have become racialized in recent phases of immigration (Cainkar, 2009; Jamal & Naber, 2008; Majaj, 2000; Naber, 2000; Saito, 2001). Scholars in many previously colonized countries (Mizutani (2006), Steyn (2001, 2004, 2005); Massad (1993), to name a few) point to similar shifts and disruptions to the “rigid” category of Whiteness in India, South Africa, and Palestine, respectively, to reveal its constructed nature. While Iran, the national setting of Satrapi’s *Persepolis*, along with two other regions within the Middle East (Saudi Arabia and Turkey), evaded formal “modern ‘Colonial Era’ colonialism,”⁴ it experienced various forms of settlement and occupation. As such, Najmabadi (1991, 2005) writes that Iran, like Thailand and other regions that don’t fit within the dichotomous notions of ‘colonizer’ and ‘colonized,’ is a “neither-nor zone”; however, Moallem (2005) explains that Iranian modernity is still defined in significant ways by the constructions of race and gender that accompanied Western civilization. For example, drawing on the work of Foucault, Moallem (2005) highlights “the humiliating effects of the discourse of race and of the role of gender and sexuality” inherited from “civilizational imperialism” (Nandy, 1989) that continue to intimately inform Iranians’ senses of themselves:

Iranian modernity cannot be studied without an understanding of its connection to European and Third World modernities, as well as to the process of cultural borrowing, which influenced both modern nation-state building in Iran and various oppositional reform and revolutionary movements... Since colonialism and postcolonialism are an integral part of modernity, it is impossible for any discussion of modernity—even in ‘neither-nor’ zones like Iran—to avoid confronting modern constructions of race and gender. Indeed, both the translational discourse of the modernist and reformist Iranian

⁴ For more information on other forms of historical colonizations within the region, please reference one or more of these cited resources: Lewis (1995) and Halliday (2003), to name two.

elite from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the present and the coercive modernizing discourse of the Pahlavi regime are intertextually related to Western conceptions of civilization and discourses about Persia (p. 31).

This brief history of global Whiteness makes visible the ways in which categories of race were (and are) *invented*, or constructed, and how they inspired and were used to validate European imperialist and colonial projects. In this way, colonialism and European expansion can only be interpreted as white supremacist projects: “‘Whites’ and ‘nonwhites’ do not preexist white supremacy, but are categories and realities in themselves brought into existence by white supremacy” (p. 39).

In this way, I build from the work of critical race theorists (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Leonardo, 2002; McIntosh, 1988; Yosso, 2005; Wing, 2000) and postcolonial Cultural Studies theorists (Ashcroft, et. al, 1989; Bhabha, 1991; Moallem, 2006; Moallem & Boal, 1999; Saïd , 1993) who place race at the center of discussions of globalization and identify that the modern colonial project was and is inextricable from the project of global White supremacy.

Postcolonial whiteness explicitly examines how whiteness has been culturally produced, reproduced, and disrupted across and within different nation-states in order to make visible and disrupt the Global White Supremacy project (Bonnett, 2002; Moreton-Robinson, et. al, 2008).

While most of the research on Whiteness has been written by scholars in the US, the UK, and Australia, the influence of colonialism and Imperialism as a racialization, and ultimately a Whiteness project, is addressed in a variety of postcolonial theory (Bhabha, 1994; Fanon, 1952; Lopez, 2005; Mohanty, 2005). As Lopez (2005) writes: “..the cultural residue of whiteness linger in the postcolonial world as an ideal, often latently, sometime not...[W]hiteness in the postcolonial moment continues to retain much of its status and desirability, if not its overt

colonial-era power” (p. 2). However, many postcolonial theorists resist centering Whiteness as an operative category of study due to its frequent implicit and invisible nationalistic orientations (Shohat, 1999; Wiegman, 1999). Several postcolonial theorists argue that Whiteness should be “seen in a global context” in which caste and religion also become central categories of analysis (Shohat, p.49). This dissertation draws from *postcolonial whiteness research* (Docker & Fisher, 2005; Gualtieri, 2009; Lopez, 2005; Nayak, 2007; Rodriguez & Villaverde, 2000; Steyn, 2007 to examine the “transnational process of racialization, which exceeds containment within fixed boundaries of identity and nation“ in an American public school classroom (Moreton-Robinson, et. al, 2008). It seeks to resist implicit nationalistic orientations by naming nationalistic discourses and how U.S. Critical Whiteness Studies is a useful tool for examining the production of whiteness around *Persepolis*.

Summary

Sociocultural theories of literacy and postcolonial theory serve as two useful theoretical lenses for identifying and interpreting how privilege and power are reproduced in classroom settings. In the following chapters, I discuss how colonial and whiteness discourses, which have historically used its normative power to suppress and marginalize others, were invoked and produced during two classroom readings of *Persepolis*.

CHAPTER 5: METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

Increasingly, “Middle Eastern” literature is being incorporated into high school English classrooms. This study sought to examine the discourses invoked and produced by two classrooms of students and one teacher during a classroom literacy event centered around émigré Iranian graphic memoir, *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi. This dissertation intends to contribute to a body of sociocultural literacy research that critically investigates social inequality as it is expressed and legitimized through language (or discourse). The primary research question guiding this inquiry is:

- What discourses are invoked and produced during two classroom literacy events around *Persepolis*?

Research sub-questions include:

- What discourses are invoked by ten focal students prior to reading *Persepolis*?
- What discourses are invoked by ten focal students after reading *Persepolis*?
- What discourses are invoked and produced during the classroom reading of *Persepolis*?
- What discourses does the teacher bring to the literacy event?

Data was collected from November 2012 through May 2013 using qualitative research methods. For the six months of the study, I acted as a participant observer in two of Mrs. Patner’s World Literature classes, where I observed her and thirty-two students during their daily routine. During this time, I also interviewed ten focal students a total of five times each, conducted formal and informal interviews with my teacher partner, and collected artifacts including PowerPoint

presentations, student writing, student work, and field notes from each observation. In the following section, I discuss, the setting and context for the study, a description of the book and its context, and the methodological framework for the study.

Study Setting, Participants, and Timeframe

Setting.

This dissertation research was conducted in two 10th grade World Literature classrooms at Concord High School, a large high school in an urban area in the southern United States. Concord High School is an International Baccalaureate high school (as of 2012), located near the downtown of a large, metropolitan area. The high school has a student population of 2,542 students, 45% of whom identify as White, 34% African-American, 14% Latino/a, 4% Multiracial, 3% Asian, and 1% Native American. Twenty-eight percent (28%) of the student population qualify for free and reduced lunch, however this information is not disaggregated by race or grade-level. Last year it was rated a “School of Distinction,” with at least 80% of students performing at grade level, as measured by state-mandated End-of-Course (EOC) exams. The surrounding metropolitan area has a population of 392,552 with 60.3% of its population identifying as White, 28% Black, 7% Hispanic, 3% “Other,” 2% Multiracial, 2.6% Asian, and 0.8% Native American.

I selected this site because it is where my teacher partner, Mrs. Patner, taught.. In the *Teacher Partner* and “*I wanted to prepare them*” sections, I describe how I became connected with and chose Mrs. Patner, my teacher partner, at Concord High School.

Research Partners

Teacher partner.

My research partner, Mrs. Patner (pseudonym), is a 27-year-old White woman born in Seattle, Washington. She learned about my project through an e-mail recruitment letter distributed by Dr. Regina Higgins, Outreach Director for the Carolina Center for the Study of the Middle East and Muslim Civilizations, through the listserv “NCTeachMidEast,” a listserv dedicated to “Middle East teaching resources for North Carolina teachers.” She was one of four teachers who responded to the listserv post--one of two who taught in a school district where I was approved to do research. I selected Mrs. Patner as a research partner because she showed a consistent eagerness to participate in the study.

During her late elementary school years, Mrs. Patner moved to a rural North Carolina town after her father’s job promotion. She attended middle school and high school in this town before attending the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill as an undergraduate Teaching Fellow and English major. During her time at UNC Chapel Hill, Mrs. Patner became interested in “World Literature.” After her undergraduate degree, she attended Wake Forest University as a Master Teacher Fellow where she received her Masters in English Education. She taught in a rural county outside of Winston-Salem for a year before moving to a large metropolitan area in the southern United States to live with her husband. At the time of data collection, it was her third year teaching 10th grade Paideia World Literature at Concord High School.

In many ways, as you will see reflected in my findings, my research partnership with Mrs. Patner become an important site for the personal investigation of my research positionality and the complicated possibilities of critical whiteness research. Mrs. Patner and I have oddly similar backgrounds. We both grew up in upper-middle class, White, Protestant families and were very successful at “doing school.” Since college, we both have become more critical of the backgrounds in which we were raised, particularly related to religion; however, we also have

strong relationships with our families and often feel a tension between this love, our ideas, and our choices. We both attended Wake Forest University for our Masters degree and both studied under Dr. Joseph Milner, Professor English Education (which we discovered after she had been recruited into the study). She, like myself as a high school teacher, is committed to “exposing children to other perspectives” through “World Literature” and identifies herself as a liberal educator committed to helping her students become “better people.” She is a leader in her school and devotes countless hours to reading books outside of the traditional canon to design units that facilitate critical student exploration of “global themes” and create greater “understanding of the world.”

I formally interviewed Mrs. Patner seven times and had daily informal conversations over the course of the project. During the interviews, I used post-critical ethnographic methods to make our similarities transparent, better understand the discourses evoked by students, and share my emergent readings of student discourses.

Student partners.

As part of this project, I partnered with two of Mrs. Patner’s 10th grade Middle Years Program (MYP), Paideia World Literature classes. The school is on a year-long A Day/B Day schedule, so each class has World Literature, on average, three times per week. In each class, some of the students are taking the class for Honors English credit and others are taking the class for Standard English credit. In each class, I have selected five (5) focal participants, whom I met with five times to better understand the discourses students were bringing to the text(s) and to clarify in-class responses.

Class A has 16 students, 15 of which identify as Female and one (1) as Male. Eight (50%) of students identify as White, seven (43.75%) identify as African-American, and one (6.25%)

identifies as Latina. Of the five focal student participants in this class, four (4) were female and one (1) was male. Two of the focal participants were White, two were African-American, and one was Latina. Students were selected from a sub-set of student volunteers who returned parent-permission, with an attempt to represent the racial and ethnic diversity of both the school and the classroom. Three of the focal students identified as very religious (Christian), one was secularly religious (Catholic/Christian), and one had no religious identification. Over the course of the project, I learned that two of these students identify themselves as having limited financial resources compared to the rest of their classmates, two identify as middle class, and one identifies as upper-middle class; however, the complexities of each of these descriptors can be reflected in the following vignettes.

Class B has 18 students, eight of which identify as Female and 10 as Male. Thirteen (72%) students identify as White, three (16.7%) identify as African-American (one of which also identifies as part-Native American), one (5.6%) identifies as Arab, and one (5.6%) identifies as Latino. Mrs. Patner has identified this class as her “most intelligent class in terms of grades and IQ.” I met with two (2) female focal students and three (3) male students. Two of the focal students were White, one was African-American, one was Latino, and one was Arab. One of the students identified as very religious (Muslim), one attended church regularly but didn’t identify as religious (Christian), two were secularly religious (Catholic and Christian), and one had no religious identification. Over the course of the project, I learned that three students identified as lower-middle class and two students identified as middle class. Vignettes that describe a sub-set of these students are below:

Kelsey

Kelsey's father was a police officer in New York. He was married to a high-power attorney, Kelsey's step-mother, and she would tell me about her trips to The City to see them and her step-siblings over lunch. "I love New York," she would say when she came back. "What do you love about it?" I asked. "Just everything- the people, the restaurants, seeing my dad and my siblings," she would say with a smile. While Kelsey primarily identified as African-American, she was proud that her grandmother was Cherokee. Jamaica told me that her mother has always told her to be proud of being a Black woman, but she told me and her classmates that sometimes "other Black people make fun of [her] because I like country or White people music and stuff. But everyone knows I love Kanye," she said with a laugh.

Lauren

Lauren is a blonde, White girl who enjoys swimming and singing. When I asked her ethnicity during our first meeting, she looked at me blankly: "Like...what do you mean?" She stared at me, somewhat in embarrassment, but also as if it was obvious: "I don't have one." Her church youth group is an integral part of her life, and in class, she openly shares her opinions as if they are facts and gets frustrated when the Puerto Rican girl with Asperbergers talks about video games. In the only moment of vulnerability during our discussions, she shared that she lived in an apartment with her mom before she remarried. "I didn't tell anyone, but life was hard in middle school. I never got new clothes. I was constantly afraid of other people finding out."

Jose

On Valentine's Day, Jose walked into our lunch with a huge bear and three balloons tied to his backback. "They're from my girlfriend," he said with a smile. Jose was born in Honduras and he enjoys playing soccer and spending time with his girlfriend of over two years. "What's your girlfriend's name?" I ask. "Maria Ricci." "Oh, is she Italian?" I ask, making an assumption

from her appearance and last name. “No, she’s Mexican,” he explained to me. Jose is an active participant in class discussions, and frequently positions himself as a “Hispanic” male who can offer insights from that particular student community. A few weeks later during lunch, he tells me “Some of my friends sometimes make fun of Mexicans. You know, like Hondurans and Guatemalans, you know, sometimes we...they..think that they’re better than Mexicans. Like, Mexicans are weird or something. You know?” “No, I didn’t know that,” I said.

Zoe

Zoe is a White, female student who is a passionate LGBTQ-rights activist and wants to be a costume designer when she graduates from college. During the *Persepolis* unit, she designed costumes for the school play and frequently brought in pictures of her recent designs. When we started the unit, Zoe said that her mother had spent some time in Iran after college and she knew a few words of Farsi. “One of my family friend’s is Saudi Arabian,” she said. “I think that the Persian language is beautiful,” she said. “I do, too,” I replied.

***Persepolis*: Description of the book.**

Persepolis I, or what I will call *Persepolis* in this dissertation, is the first part of a two-part, French-language graphic novel written by Iranian-born, French-resident Marjane Satrapi. Drawn in black and white, the book depicts Satrapi’s life as a child following the Iranian Revolution (1978-79) and the war between Iran and Iraq. *Persepolis II*, which was not read in Mrs. Patner’s class, describes Satrapi’s remembered experiences living in Europe and Iran as a young adult.

Persepolis II is rarely read in high school English classrooms due to its sexual content and drug references.⁵ *Persepolis* is often considered part of a new wave of autobiographic writing by

⁵ An animated film, *Persepolis*, based on the book(s), was released in 2007, and was critically acclaimed by Western film critics. The Iranian government, on the other hand, sent a letter to the French embassy in Tehran stating, “This year the Cannes Film Festival, in an unconventional and unsuitable act, has chosen a movie about Iran that has presented an unrealistic face of the

diasporic Iranian women, including Tara Bamhrampour's *To See and See Again: A Life in Iran and America* (2000), Gelareh Assayesh's *Saffron Sky: A Life Between Iran and America* (2002), Firoozeh Dumas's *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America* (2003), Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003), Roya Hakakian's *Journey from Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran* (2004), and Azadeh Moaveni's *Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America and America in Iran* (2005).

On one hand, *Persepolis* has been highly acclaimed by many literary scholars (Naghibi & O'Malley, 2005; Tensuan, 2006). Some herald the text as a prime example of a post-colonial, transcultural narrative (Davis, 2005; Heer & Worcester, 2012; Honary, 2013) that maps out the complexities and contingencies of identity (Naghibi & O'Malley, 2005) through an innovative autobiographical, graphic/text medium (Chute, 2008; Tensuan, 2006). Tensuan (2006) states that *Persepolis* "recast[s] the visual and narrative conventions of comics to provide critical commentary on issues ranging from the social construction of gender to the forces subtending forms of prejudice" (2006). Naghibi and O'Malley (2005) argue that *Persepolis* uses autobiographical narrative to "challenge the stereotype of the self-effacing, modest Iranian woman and to write themselves back into the history of the nation" (p. 223). Some English Education scholars believe that *Persepolis* "provides a creative venue for classroom discussions about nation, citizenship, gender, and war" and "offers a transversal space in which students can question Western notions about the Middle East" (Botshon & Plastas, 2009). They continue:

"By offering students a more complex and less dualistic perspective on Iranian society and women in particular, *Persepolis* encourages students to question the source of their

achievements and results of the glorious Islamic Revolution in some of its parts" ("Iran protests"). Despite their initial objections, selections of the film were shown in Tehran in 2008.

(perceived) national insecurity and offers models of agency rooted in the homeland (Iran) they have been encouraged to fear” (p. 2).

However, *Persepolis* and its enormous popularity in the United States have also been critiqued, particularly in the fields of Middle Eastern Studies (cooke, 2008; Whitlock, 2006). *Persepolis* and its popularity in the West have been argued to represent the “syndication” of subaltern life story (Whitlock, 2006) and a global economy that profits from a commodification of trauma and testimony (cooke, 2008). Keshavarz (2007) argues that texts like *Persepolis* produce a “New Orientalist narrative” (p. 2) which “erases the complexity and richness of local Iranian culture and substitutes it with a picture of “evil Muslim behavior” in relief against the “unconditional goodness of things Western” (p. 122). Whitlock (2008) characterizes autobiographies like *Persepolis* as “soft weapons” that “[play] a major role in the global com-modification of cultural differences that has been a boom industry in the recent past” (p. 54). cooke (2008) explains that while life narratives are “vitally important because they can perform ‘small acts of cultural translation in a time of precarious life’ (p. 23),” she warns that texts like *Persepolis* can be “easily co-opted into propoganda” (pp. 3, 105). “The challenge to the autobiographer,” she writes, “is to walk the fine line between co-optation and cultural translation” (p. 190).

A growing body of English Education research has studied how *Persepolis* is being taught in the English classroom (Botshon, et. al, 2009; Hammond, 2009; Jacobs, 2007; Mortimore, 2009; Spanger, 2010). Most of this literature examines how *Persepolis* is being taught as a graphic novel in the English classroom (Chun, 2009; Jacobs, 2007; Mortimore, 2009). Several scholars have explored how *Persepolis* is taught in the social studies classroom, primarily as a way to teach “global conflict” (Christensen, 2006). Little work has used an emergent design within a

critical literacy framework rooted in Middle Eastern Studies scholarship to examine the discourses evoked and performed during classroom readings of the text.

Description of the *Persepolis* Unit

The *Persepolis* unit was part of a two-book unit entitled “Indifference.” Mrs. Patner explained that this unit was designed by the 10th grade World Literature Professional Learning Community (PLC), a state-mandated learning community comprised of all of the school’s 10th grade English teachers, to address a specific IB Unit Question (a requirement for each unit in the International Baccalaureate Middle Years program). While the team had not defined “indifference” as a PLC, Mrs. Patner defined indifference as “when you make a definite choice to look away from a situation or an event or whatever the case may be. Choose not to understand something.” She said the unit basically centered around the idea that “You can change the world around you.”

The 10th grade World Literature PLC’s learning goals were two fold. They hoped to teach:

1. Point of View: To help them understand and experience world events from another person’s point of view. Mrs. Patner explained: “The whole reason we have them read *Night* and *Persepolis* is to help them understand and experience world events from another person’s point of view, obviously. So, point of view is a big focus of this unit. And we talk about it in terms of like literary term point of view as well: first person, second person, and all of that good stuff. And how that affects a story and the way that it is told.”
2. Author’s Purpose: “We’ll also deal with- we’re always dealing with author’s purpose. That’s always a big thing for us. Why did Marjane choose to include this particular scene from her life? As opposed to another? What was so important about this one?”

What did she mean to choose? In this picture, why did she choose to draw this picture this way? Things like that. That's a major focus as well."

While the unit was originally "centered around *Night* as the text," Mrs. Patner decided to include *Persepolis* in the unit because "I think it fits in with a lot of the same themes." She explained:

"We don't have a unit that includes *Persepolis* per se, so this is just where I put it in because I think it fits in with a lot of the same themes. Partly because the students don't know enough about the culture, like in general, so it's a good way to work that in- with the stereotypes and the human rights the things that we talk about in here with the indifference unit. So, it fits pretty nicely, I think."

For Mrs. Patner, her biggest learning goal was for her students to be more open minded:

"I think that my biggest learning goal is for them to be more open minded. And realize that just because someone believes something different than- whether it's in faith or someone has experienced something different from them- doesn't mean that that different is *bad*. So, we'll deal a lot with in the next couple of days, dealing with *Crash* as well, we'll be talking about stereotypes in terms of Middle East since that's something that- we'll talk about Farhad in the movie but we'll also talk about *Persepolis*, of course, in terms of that as well."

During this unit of study, students read two books: *Night*, a memoir about Elie Wiesel's experience at Nazi German concentration camps at Auschwitz and Buchenwald, and *Persepolis I* (referred to as *Persepolis* during this study). During this unit, they also discussed the movie *Crash*, a crime drama film about the social and racial tensions in Los Angeles, California, and wrote a research paper.

In order to understand the context surrounding the reading and teaching of *Persepolis*, I observed two of Mrs. Patner's World Literature classrooms for the entirety of the *Indifference*

unit. A timeline of the *Intolerance* unit is included below, followed by a brief description of a short pre-unit that informs the study.

Date	Text	My Role
November-December 2012	Finished <i>Crash</i> , started reading <i>Night</i>	Observed and took field notes (recordings were limited to discussions of race during <i>Crash</i> discussions). Researcher journal was kept.
December 2012-January 2013	Finished <i>Night</i>	Observed and took field notes. Researcher journal was kept.
January-April 2013	Read and discussed <i>Persepolis</i> in class; Read literature circle text outside of class and discussed in class.	Observed and recorded all discussions related to <i>Persepolis</i> . Interviewed teacher and student partners. Written artifacts related to <i>Persepolis</i> were collected. Field notes and researcher journal were also written.
April-May 2013	Personal Project and Research Paper	Did not observe; Conducted final interviews

Mrs. Patner's Pedagogy

Mrs. Patner used personal funds to purchase a classroom set of *Persepolis I* books three years ago. As she only has one classroom set of books and four World Literature classes, the students are reading *Persepolis* during class. The hour-and-a-half long class period is usually broken into two 45-minute segments. During the first 45 minutes to an hour, the students read *Persepolis* silently and discuss the book in small groups and as a whole class. During the final 30 to 45 minutes of class, the students meet in literature circles to discuss a self-selected book read outside of class.

During her teaching of the unit, Mrs. Patner drew from a variety of English Education teaching practices, including silent reading, reading aloud, classroom discussions, written response, and literature circles.

Mrs. Patner's World Literature course consisted primarily of silent reading, and teacher-led whole group discussions guided by study guide questions; however, she encouraged student questions and promoted honest dialogue around topics. The book was taught as part of an *Indifference* unit, which also included Elie Wiesel's *Night* (1955), a memoir about his experiences at Auschwitz and Buchenwald during Nazi Germany in 1944-1945.

Data Collection

Data collected included the following.

Table 2. Data Collected

Data Source	Number Collected
Textual Analysis of Narrative Text	--
Transcriptions of Pre-Reading Teacher Interviews	2
Transcriptions of Pre-Reading Student Interviews	10
Field Notes from Pre-Reading Observations	20
Journal Reflections from Pre-Reading Observations	10
Transcriptions of Classroom Discussions of Texts	57
Classroom Artifacts including: Curriculum materials Samples of Student Writing Student drawings or other responses	213
During Reading Observation Field Notes	57

Data Source	Number Collected
Research Journal Reflections	33
Transcriptions of During-Reading Teacher Interviews	4
Transcriptions of During- Reading Student Interviews	30
Transcriptions of After-Reading Teacher Interviews	2
Transcriptions of After-Reading Student Interviews	9

Analysis

Critical Discourse Theory and Analysis

Critical Discourse Theory

Discourse theory addresses ways we think and talk about a subject influence and reflect the ways in which we act in relation to that subject (Foucault, 1972; Hall 1997; Phillips and Hardy, 2002). According to Foucault, meaning is created through discourse. Foucault stipulates that discourse, knowledge, and idea formation are limited and regulated by hierarchies of power and their various manifestations. He writes: “Finally, I believe that this will to knowledge, thus reliant upon institutional support and distribution tends to exercise a sort of pressure, a power of constraint upon other forms of discourse (Foucault, 1994, p. 234).

Critical Discourse Analysis, as a paradigm and a mode of analysis, builds upon the work of Foucault and the Discourse Analysis work of sociolinguists to ‘demystify’ ideologies and power through systematic investigation of language. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) presents “language as social practice” (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997) influenced by the contexts of language use:

CDA sees discourse--language use in speech and writing-- as a form of 'social practice.' Describing discourse as social practice implies a dialectical relationships between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s), and social structure(s), which frame it: The discursive event is shaped by them, but it also shapes them. That is, discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned- it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people. It is constitutive both in the sense that it helps to sustain and reproduce the social status quo, and in the sense that it contributes to transforming it. Since discourse is so socially consequential, it gives rise to important issues of power. Discursive practices may have major ideological effects- that is, they can help produce and reproduce unequal power relations between (for instance) social classes, women and men, and ethnic/cultural majorities and minorities through the ways in which they represent things and position people (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997: 258).

Deriving its "critical" approach from the work of early critical theorists like Jurgen Habermas and the Frankfurt School (Anthonissen, 2001), CDA is fundamentally interested in examining how dominance, discrimination, and power are manifested in and through language. Most researchers who use CDA would likely support Habermas's claims that "language is also a medium of domination and social force. It serves to legitimize relations of organized power. Insofar as the legitimizations of power relations...are not articulated...language is also ideological" (Habermas, 1967: 259). CDA seeks to critically investigate social inequality as it is expressed and legitimized through language (or discourse).

Gee's (1990, 1999, 2004 b) approach to critical discourse analysis (differentiated from Fairclough's capitalized Critical Discourse Analysis) is ecumenical and attempts "to explicate

the workings of identity and social practices in society” and “unmask the ideologies, belief systems that perpetuate status-quo dynamics of power in social relations” (Gee, 1990 cited in Kramer, 2007). Gee’s critical discourse analysis resists a rigid methodology of discourse analysis, due to the contingencies inherent in all discursive moments. However, Gee (2004b) offers “four tools of inquiry” that can be used in an iterative examination of texts:

- 1) Social languages: “A way of using language so as to enact a particular socially situated identity” (p. 43)
- 2) Situated meanings: “meanings that are specific and situated in the actual contexts of their use” (p. 44)
- 3) Cultural models: “distributed across and embedded in socioculturally defined groups of people and their texts and practices” (p. 45).
- 4) Discourses: “distinctive ways of thinking, being acting, interacting, believing, knowing, feeling, valuing, dressing, and using one’s body...also distinctive ways of using various symbols, images, objects, artifacts, tools, technologies, times, places, and spaces (p. 46).

Using Gee’s (1990, 1999, 2004b) critical discourse analysis framework, I explicitly describe my approach below.

Analysis

In the first phase of analysis, I used HyperRESEARCH, a qualitative data analysis program, to store and explore my data as well as develop and refine my coding scheme. As the data was transcribed, I conducted an initial, cursory reading of the transcribed and written data from the teacher and students. I recorded marginal notes from my fieldnotes to provide contextual information about the students’ affect and other non-verbal communication not made visible in

the transcription. I wrote formal memos that reflected on salient observations during my observations. I, also, identified and noted “Conversations” that arose during the class sessions and interviews. Gee (1999) describes “Conversations” (with a capital C) as long-running historical controversies that are shaped by arguments and values. Upon conclusion of the unit, I conducted a second round of analysis in which I added contextual data and isolated “chunks” of salient discourse that pointed to underlying ideological orientations. Meaningful “chunks” of data were then divided into “utterances,” or segments of texts spoken by a single speaker at a specific moment, which were then analyzed for their situated meanings and storylines (Van Sluys, et. al., 2006). In my analysis for *situated meanings*, I identified key words and phrases in the text, along with a close reading of what I thought the words meant in that time and place. Additionally, I attempted to identify possible storylines, or *cultural models*, that attempted to name the speaker’s assumptions and beliefs (Gee, 1999, 2000, 2001). This analysis helped me conduct my third round of analysis, in which I coded data with “patterns, themes, and categories” (Srivastava, 2009) that pointed to the situated identities and activities, or Discourses, that were being invoked and produced. After collapsing repeated codes, I arrived at 12 codes in all:

The following categories emerged during my analysis:

- Discourses of Whiteness (Fine *et. al*, 1997; Hunter & Nettles, 1999; Kincheloe *et. al*, 1997; McLaren, 1995, 1997)
- Colonial/Orientalist discourses (Bhabha, 1996; Saïd , 1978)
- Globalization discourses (Leonardo, 2002)
- American nationalistic discourses (Balibar, 1991)
 - “Homeland security” discourse
 - Discourse of Rights (Stychin, 1998)

- Republican and Democratic discourses
- Religious discourses (DePalma, 2009)
 - Christian discourses (in their great variety), Class A (Thomson, 2009)
 - Christian and Muslim discourses (in their great variety), Class B (Thomson, 2009)
- Western feminist discourses (Mohanty, 1988)
- Blackness Discourses (Hooks, 1990; Johnson, 2003)

*Citations in parenthesis above name an author/body of work that has helped me define these discourses.

From November 2012 to May 2013, I conducted a six-month qualitative research study examining the discourses invoked and produced prior to, during, and after two literacy events centered around the Marjane Satrapi's Iranian graphic memoir *Persepolis*. This study was intended to inform sociocultural theories of literacy by examining the discursive constructions of knowledge, power, and identity during the readings of the text. In the subsequent findings sections, I focus on patterns of discourses that were most salient to me during my analysis. In this process, I admittedly made choices that limited the discourses presented.

CHAPTER 6. BEFORE READING: THE INVOCATION OF ORIENTALIST AND NEO-ORIENTALIST DISCOURSES & TEXTUAL POSITIONING

A week before the class reading of *Persepolis*, I met with ten focal students to better understand their personal histories and what they knew about Iran before reading *Persepolis*. During these conversations, the ten focal students positioned Iran as a “place that [they were] interested in learning about,” but one that they currently understood to be a violent, “religiously-controlled” region, indistinguishable from their similar understandings of “the Middle East.” Five prominent Orientalist and neo-Orientalist discourses (Saïd, 1978, 1983; Sadowski, 1993; Samiei, 2009; Tuastad, 2003) were evoked and used to position Iran as a monolithic, “Islamic,” violent/ungoverned, and misogynistic region indistinguishable from other regions in “the Middle East.” These discourses were also used to position and construct a well-governed, peace-seeking United States and paternalistic discourse of care (or what I refer to as an “I’m sorry” discourse) towards groups of people inhabiting this imaginary geographic region. The focus of this chapter is to name and describe four Orientalist and neo-Orientalist discourses that ten focal students evoked and produced prior to the classroom reading of *Persepolis*, including:

- 1) “It’s Middle East-ish”: the invocation of monolithic, homogenizing discourses that conflate and construct an imaginary Middle East;
- 2) “They’re Fighting” and “The United States is peaceful” discourses, which positioned the Middle East or Iran as a violent, war-filled region and the United States as the savior.

- 3) “It’s religiously controlled” discourses, which conflated the region with an imaginary, monolithic “Islam.” These discourses were also used to mobilize an “oppressed Muslim woman” discourse;
- 4) “Representational Discourses”: Discourses which positioned the text as capable of “teaching them about Iran.”

Orientalist and Neo-Orientalist Discourses

Building from the work of Foucault, Saïd describes Orientalism to be the false cultural assumptions of the Occident (or “West”) that facilitates the cultural misrepresentation of the Orient (or “East”) broadly, and more specifically, the Middle East (Saïd , 1978; 1983). Saïd describes Orientalism as “subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice against Arabo–Islamic peoples and their culture,” inherited and derived from overly romanticized images of Asia and the Middle East, that in turn validated and helped justify Western colonial and imperial control of these regions. In *The Nation* (1980), Saïd writes:

So far as the United States seems to be concerned, it is only a slight overstatement to say that Muslims and Arabs are essentially seen as either oil suppliers or potential terrorists. Very little of the detail, the human density, the passion of Arab–Moslem life has entered the awareness of even those people whose profession it is to report the Arab world. What we have, instead, is a series of crude, essentialized caricatures of the Islamic world, presented in such a way as to make that world vulnerable to military aggression. (p. 2)

Informed by shifting global relations, neo-Orientalist scholars use and reshape Saïd’s concept of Orientalism to describe continued (thus the use of “neo” instead of “new”) yet shifting “tropes of othering” in North America and other regions following the events surrounding September 11,

2001 (Behdad & Williams, 2012; Tuastad, 2003). Behdad and Williams (2012) describe neo-Orientalism as a “supplement to enduring modes of Orientalistic representation” and explain: “Like it’s classical counterpart, for example, neo-Orientalism is monolithic, totalizing, reliant on a binary logic, and based on an assumption of moral and cultural superiority over the Oriental other.” Neo-Orientalism seeks to “challenge the post-Orientalist pretense in the West today” (Behdad & Williams, p. 297) and describe how Orientalism is a changing entity that will “always entail rearticulations of otherness to ensure its cultural hegemony in the face of complex political and social change” (p. 298). Three common neo-Orientalist discourses that locate some of the shifts in Orientalist “othering tropes,” include: the appropriation of Oriental Voices Speaking Occidental Discourses, the use of Journalism/Historicism and the Neo-Orientalist Regimes of Truth, and Monolithic Representation of the Veil. In the sections below, I use some excerpts from my discussions with ten focal students prior to the literacy event in order to highlight several common Orientalist and Neo-Orientalist discourses that were invoked. The invocation and production of these discourses point to the discourses that students were bringing to the literacy event.

It’s Middle East-ish: Orientalist and neo-Orientalist discourses that conflate regions

Prior to reading *Persepolis*, I asked the ten focal student participants to share what they knew about *Persepolis* and Iran, the country in which the novel is set. All (100%) of the students conflated Iran with other regions within the Middle East or with the term “the Middle East.” One student referred to Iran as “an Arab, Muslim country” where “Saddam Hussein was.” Another student said, “I don’t really know much, other than like what I saw on TV about the war,” seemingly interchanging Iraq and Iran. One student described Iran as a “place that we’ve been in struggle with... for years- especially after the events of 9/11.” Repeatedly, students used “Iran”

and “the Middle East” interchangeably to refer to the region in which the memoir is set. With these statements, the students mobilized Orientalist and neo-Orientalist discourses to construct a conflated, monolithic geography that homogenizes a large region with disparate geographies, histories, languages, religions, and cultural practices. These types of homogenizing discourses serve to “sweep aside or ignore” the “dizzying variety of peoples, language, experiences and cultures” to construct an ‘Orient’ against which the ‘West’/Occident can define itself (Chakraborty, 2012; Sarwar, 2007; Saïd, 1978, p. 871).

War

The students also invoked dominant neo-Orientalist discourses to describe Iran and the greater “Middle East” as a war-torn region in conflict with the United States (or “us”). For example, in a conversation with one focal student, she defines Iran in relation to its use of “nuclear weapons” and “the Taliban”:

KA: Can you tell me what you know about Iran?

FS2: I don’t really know a lot. I know that it’s an Arab, Muslim country. Isn’t Iran who they suspect about nuclear weapons?

[I nod].

FS2: Saddam Hussein was in Iran. He was not a good person. I think it was dictated by Saddam Hussein, wasn’t he part of the Taliban or something? Or some really strong Muslim group or something like that?”

One student explained that “we” are “trying to stop the wars and find peace” but “*they* (my emphasis) keep fighting.” She referenced a recent bombing that took place in Bangladesh (South Asia) as an example of the fighting “that makes her sad,” further constructing an imagined geography of the Middle East that is juxtaposed to a peaceful (and compassionate) United States.

With these comments, the students evoked dominant discourses that position the Middle East as a monolithic, war-filled region in contrast with the peace-seeking United States (“we”). These discourses simultaneously position the Middle East as a violent region and a threat, while the United States is constructed as a paternalistic care-taker justified in its role as an imperial power (El-Hajj, 2009). El-Hajj writes:

Dominant discourses define American national identity in relation to citizens who are treated as *free* and *equal* ... This national ideal is currently projected against a dominant view of Arabs/Muslims as captive to cultural beliefs and practices. (El-Hajj, 2009)

Religiously Controlled and Not Much Government

The focal students repeatedly invoked and produced discourses that positioned Iran and the broader “Middle East” as a “religiously-controlled” region that “lacked a government.” By pairing these two discourses together and against one another, the students invoked neo-Orientalist discourses that position Islamic religious and political leadership as “religious-control” and lacking in governmental stability (Sadowski, 1993; Tuastad, 2003). One student explained that Iran is “very religiously controlled...I don’t think that the government- there’s not much of a government anymore.” Another student highlighted the “trouble about rebellion control” and “a lot of religious views [that] are part of the government.” Another student described “the Middle East” as where “Muslim people are from” and where people wear “formal attire” and are “not open with their religion.” The veil is mentioned specifically and she describes this practice as one “mostly in the Middle East.” With these statements, the student evokes dominant Orientalist and neo-Orientalist discourses which assign a singular religious identity, “Islam,” to the imagined geography of ‘the Middle East. By conflating “Islam,” a religion with various denominations (including Sunni, Shia, Sufism, Ahmadiyya, Quranists,

Yasdanism, and the Nation of Islam movement), with an imagined geography in which a variety of religions are practiced (including Judaism, Christianity, Baha'i, Druze, Yazidi, Mandaean, Gnosticism, Yarsanism, Shabakism and Zoroastrianism, to name a few), the student invokes a discourse that inappropriately homogenizes and conflates disparate regions with a singular religious practice. In *Orientalism*, Saïd argues that the initial distinction made between “us” and “them,” what is sometimes referred to as proto-orientalism (Kalmar, 2013), was initially rooted in religious antagonisms of the Christian ‘West’ and Islamic ‘East’ that developed in the period leading up to, during, and after the Crusades. Kalmar argues that after the Crusades, in a relatively calm time of peace, this proto-orientalist picture of the barbaric, Muslim East, was constructed and widely distributed in order to validate the fighting and further construct a unified “Christian Europe.” While in modern Orientalism, the secularization of Europe profoundly influenced the development of Orientalism as a field of study, “Islam” still accounted and accounts for the sum total of any Muslim’s experience (Saïd, 1978). As Bayoumi (2012) writes: “From Islam comes everything and to Islam goes everything, and Orientalism’s aim is to drive this point home with a repeated and relentless monotony” (p. 80). Saïd critiqued this totalizing description of Islam or religion as a “top to bottom” explanatory measure that would never be accepted as an explanatory measure in scholarship about the Occident.

“Because I Don’t know Much About the Middle East: Persepolis as Representational Text

The student also constructs *Persepolis* as a tool for “learning more about the Middle East.” She states that she is “excited” and “really interested” in reading the text “because [she doesn’t] know much about the Middle East.” This approach to reading literature ‘from somewhere else’ as a mirror into the culture is a common approach to reading global literature. In stating this, the student speaks within dominant discourses that amalgamate a group of ethnically, culturally, and

linguistically diverse regions into a single region (“the Middle East”), but also talks about the text within a voyeuristic model of reading (hooks, 1989). In her essay, “Eating the Other: Desire of Resistance,” bell hooks (2009) defines voyeuristic reading as “multicultural consumption” which, in the words of Lipshin (2010), “becomes a problematic way to ‘solve’ this fundamental contradiction in the white subject’s experiences of race and place. Eating the other, thus, operates as an exotic ‘seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture’ (hooks 21) while allowing the consumer to ignore the various inconveniences and oppressive power relations that come with a marginalized subject positioning.” By working within this framework of reading, hooks argues that an individual “only further relegat[es] people of diverse backgrounds to ‘objects’ rather than ‘subjects’” (hooks, 1989).

By positioning this single book written by one, exilic author set in Iran as capable of providing “interesting” insight into the geography and history of the entire Middle East, the student positions *Persepolis* as a representative text (Suleiman and Muhawi, 2006), or a cultural artifact, that can be said to “reflect,” “mirror,” or “capture” the national or cultural character of a people group (Hall, 2001). Suleiman and Muhawi (2006) critique a representational approach to reading:

[A reflective theory of reading] additionally assumes that the nation predates its cultural expression in literature as the non-political site of the political. Furthermore, reflection assumes the existence of an inherent and pre-existing meaning in the text which captures essential features of the national culture; it additionally assumes that this meaning is accessible to the members of the nation who can recover it with a high degree of intersubjective validity.” (p. 219)

In summary, during my early conversations with the ten focus group students, similar Orientalist and neo-Orientalist discourses were invoked that positioned Iran as part of a violent, religiously extreme, monolithic “Middle East” that lacks governance. While various scholars have examined discourse about the Middle East in news media and other texts (Hall, 1992; Kandiyoti, 1996; Mohanty, 1988, 1991; Abu-Lughod, 1998) very little research has made visible the discourses of youth in school contexts about ‘the Middle East.’ The identification of Orientalist and neo-Orientalist discourse evoked by students informs a branch of sociocultural theories of literature that examine the ways in which difference is constructed, enacted, and represented through discourse in school contexts. The identification of these discourses allowed me to better understand how students were positioning themselves in relationship to the text prior to reading *Persepolis*. The next chapter highlights the discourses that students brought to the end of the *Persepolis* unit, identifying key discursive shifts that took place over the literacy event.

CHAPTER 7: AFTER THE READING: DISCOURSES OF WHITENESS SHOWN THROUGH SAMENESS AND ORIENTALIST DISCOURSES

Introduction

After finishing *Persepolis*, the students took a final exam and participated in a whole-class seminar that allowed them to share their perceptions of *Persepolis*. This data was supplemented by conversation with the ten focal group students to further understand their final perceptions of the text. Using these data, I identify three commonly evoked discourses after reading *Persepolis*:

- 1) “They’re Just Like Us”: Whiteness Sameness Discourses
- 2) “I’m So Glad I Live Here”: Reification of neo-Orientalist Discourses and American Nationalistic Discourses
- 3) “I Wish the Book Had Been More Serious”: Invoking “Pity Discourses”

Using Zeus Leonardo’s (2002) work that theoretically links globalization discourse and Whiteness discourse, I highlight how the students’ discourse continued to invoke and reproduce Orientalist and neo-Orientalist discourses that positioned Iran and “the Middle East” as unsafe, violent, misogynistic, and deserving of pity. I, also, identify a key shift in discourse which invoked liberal Whiteness universalistic/sameness discourses that masks how privilege has historically and continues to function on a global level.

“They’re Just Like Us: Invoking Whiteness Through Sameness Discourse

One of the most prominent discursive shifts over the reading of *Persepolis* was the discursive production of sameness discourse (“They’re Just Like Us”). This discourse seems in

sharp contrast to the *difference* discourses invoked and produced through Orientalist and neo-Orientalist discourses prior to reading *Persepolis*; however, Critical Whiteness scholarship outlines how universalistic discourses operate to functionally and systematically mask and uphold the reproduction of privilege.

As part of their exam, students completed ten short answer response questions, which required students to provide two examples of textual evidence to support their opinion. One of the questions asked students “Do you think that Satrapi met her goal in writing *Persepolis*?” This question required students to remember Satrapi’s goal and provide two examples of textual evidence to support their opinion. In several student responses (one of which is included below), students communicated that Satrapi met her goal by depicting Marjane and Iran as “like the rest of the world”:

“I believe that she did achieve her goal because throughout the story, she showed people against the extremists. ‘What do I see here, Michael Jackson? The symbol of decadence?’ [reference to book]. This quote shows that even though she knows she is not dressed properly, she still want to fit in with the rest of the world and not the extremists.” This response was similar to many students’ exam responses, which highlighted that Marji “is just like us,” “normal, and “just a regular girl.” One of the focal students used “normal” discourses to highlight the similarities between Iranians featured in the book and “regular people” in the United States:

KA: So what's your perception of Iran after reading this book?

Student: Most of the people are normal. It's just that there's just like a few high-powered people that like just want to take over the world.

Teacher: So you said most of the people are normal, what do you mean by “normal”?

Student: Like just regular people that they – they just go about life working and like having fun with their life, they are enjoying it.

KA: What's your perception of Iran now? What do you think Iran is like in Contemporary Iran, 2013?

FS: Sort of the same, but you know they're probably look just like us and we're just not realizing it.

KA: What do you mean?

FS: You ever look at TV and you see those commercials with little African children and all that stuff?

KA: Yea.

FS: Have you ever thought to yourself like what if that's just that one place and all the other places are just like how we are? Like South Africa, I know that they're just like you know how we are over here.

KA: Hm.

FS: And they're just picking the bad parts out.

KA: Ah.

These *sameness* discourses, “They’re Just Like Us,” “They’re Normal,” “We’re All the Same,” are invocations of Whiteness discourse that situate the West or the United States as possessors of universal knowledge and values that can be universally extended to other global communities. These discourse are similar to universalist discourses rooted in colonial histories that assume universal truths based on Euro-centric beliefs and frameworks. Colonial expansion is often described as a “Universalist Project,” where “societal regimes of truth” (Foucault, 1972-1977),

or the values and beliefs of Western and North American colonizers, were mobilized and spread in order to “save” or “civilize” the colonized population. Said writes:

“Universalism has created a world knowledge hierarchy placing Western Europe, North America and the rest of the ‘developed’ world at the top, as the center of knowledge, and placing the rest of the globe below, as ignorant and needing to be educated” (p. 117).

Sameness discourses, like those evoked in the excerpts above, continue in a colonial legacy that seeks to universalize and homogenize based on Euro-centric values and frameworks. Through this postcolonial whiteness discourses of *sameness* (explored more in the following chapter), the students continue to normalize Western/American values as “universal” and disguise how power and race inform the experiences of global communities. Universalistic discourses are very similar to “colorblind racist” discourses that choose to disguise how race continues to influence the lives of individuals in powerful ways (Bonilla-Silva, 2009) in which Critical Race Theorists argue that universalism seeks to make ‘objective’ and disguise the power relations.

Critical Race Theorists communicate that “Universalism” discourse, or liberal discourse that manifests itself in comments like “We’re all the same,” appears to address and emphasize the commonalities among groups of people; however, universalism discourses disguise how power has operated within and among communities and also neglects to address how Western values remain unchallenged and unquestioned within this dynamic.

“I’m So Glad I Live Here”: Discursive Constructions of U.S. Nationhood and “Over There”

While many students evoked the discourse of “They’re Just Like Us” at the end of the book, 100% of the focus students also said that they would prefer not to live in Iran. Ninety-percent (90%) of focal students communicate the desire to visit Iran; however, none would choose to live there. The reasons mentioned included, but are not limited to: “the bombings,”

“the war,” “treatment of women,” “not wanting to wear the hijab,” and “liking life in the United States” (including sub-discourse of “safety,” “family,” and “friends”). Two excerpts of text which demonstrate these discourses are below:

KA: Yeah. Do you feel like the book has changed the way that you see yourself at all?

FS6: Just that to see how great my life is in America, that we don’t have to deal with threats of bombing or missiles like every day and threatening our life, that we can just go about our day and just do whatever.

Another student echoed similar concerns:

KA: So do you feel like Iran is a place that you would like to visit or a place where you could live?

FS9: I feel like I can visit it, but I wouldn’t want to live there. I like living where I am.

KA: Yeah.

FS9: I think it would be kind of tough.

KA: So tell me...

FS9: Especially if they speak a different language.

KA: Yeah.

FS9: I wouldn’t want to.

KA: Yeah. And they do. Yeah. So what—why would you like to visit there but not necessarily live there?

FS9: Just to see what like—I’d just like to see what goes on in their society compared to ours. But like live there, I don’t think I’d want to like get into the things that they have to deal with and just like enjoy my—enjoy our society here.

KA: Yeah. What are some of the things that you feel like they’d have to deal with?

FS9: Like I mean like some of the things that they have to do for their religion I feel like doesn't mean—I mean like you wouldn't have to do to me, but that's like their religion so I understand that. So like but if it like my religion you don't have to go like pray five times, you pray whenever you want. Or you don't have to wear like tight covering, you can wear whatever you want. I just don't think I could do that if I lived there. I think it would be really rough for me.

KA: Yeah.

In this conversation, the student explains that he would like to visit the country, potentially drawing from touristic discourses (“I’d like to visit”) that work from a position of privilege and might possibly be rooted in colonial exotic discourses. However, he communicates that he would not like to live there due to the “different languages,” the different religious practices, and female clothing. The students seemed to use examples from *Persepolis* (*bombings, clothing, religion*) to support some of the Orientalist and neo-Orientalist discourses that he initially brought to the text.

“I Wish That it Had Been More Serious”: Colonial Care as Whiteness

During the whole-group discussion, a group of white, upper-class students positioned the text as “not serious enough” for them. I was intrigued by this statement, as I had never heard it before. After reading and re-reading the conversations, I perceive it to be situated in a paternalistic impulse to “feel more pity” for those living in Iran (or the Middle East, depending on how much the student conflates the two). In the following excerpt from the seminar discussion, you can see how various students expressed frustration at the lack of seriousness:

LP: So, what did you think of the book?

[long pause]

Student1: I liked it.

[Several students nod]

[pause]

Student2: I liked some parts of it, but I didn't think that it was serious enough.

Student3: Yea.

Student4: What?

LP: What do you mean: "not serious enough"?

Student3: Like, it was 'too kid-ish.'

[several students nod].

Student5: Yea, like, it didn't seem appropriate to read about the serious things that happened in like a cartoon.

Student 2: Yea, the cartoon wasn't serious enough. Like, I would have liked it more if it had been written out.

Student6: Like, when we read *Night*, I could really *feel* what he was going through. Like I felt like I was there. Through his writing. I couldn't feel that through the comic.

Student7: Yea, I wanted to *feel* [gestured to chest with hand] more. Like, some of the things that she describes are pretty bad, and it felt weird like reading them in a comic book.

Student8: I mean, they're writing about all of these bombings and torture. It just seems almost disrespectful not to write about it.

LP: OK, So, you wanted to feel more. Interesting. I've never had a class say that.

Student9: I liked the comic book style. I thought that it showed a different perspective.

This conversation and others that echoed it were most often dominated by white, seemingly upper-class students who wanted to “feel more” for Marjie’s events. While I didn’t have the opportunity to follow up and ask the students “feel more *what?*” (“*more happiness? more compassion? more sadness?*”) I interpreted this critique as evoking two discourses that prominently influence the reading of “World Literature” broadly and “Middle Eastern” literature specifically. On one hand, this discourse of “feeling more” points to the ways that “global literature” has historically and is frequently positioned within the English classroom. “English literature” as a core academic subject was constructed and created as a colonial tool for “teaching the values and culture” of the British (Pennycook, 1994, 2002). Historically, any texts that were included into the “English literature” canon were intended to achieve the same purpose. For example, in India, while colonial schools required Indians to primarily study English literature and language as a means of apprenticing them into European thinking and behavior, often, individuals of Indian decent or from Hong Kong were translated in order to “engage with” the colonized cultures. For example, in the context of India, Naranjana (1992) writes:

the famous Orientalist attempt to reveal the former greatness of India often manifests itself as the British or European task of translating and thereby *purifying* the debased native texts.

This Romantic Orientalist project slides almost imperceptibly into the Utilitarian Victorian enterprise of ‘improving’ the natives through English education (Niranjana, 1992, p. 2, cited in Pennycook, 2002, p. 103).

This legacy continues in the contemporary high school English classroom. As Damrosch (2003) writes, “World Literatureiteration” courses in the United States include literature that is “merely

sober or depressing” (Carey-Webb, 2001), or in the words of Stam (1983) usually involve “third world objects of spectacle for the first world’s voyeuristic gaze” (p. 2).

This positioning also informs the students’ statements, which I believe invoke *colonist care discourses* or *liberal white discourses of care* (Noblit, 1993; Toshalis, 2012), in which power is enacted under the moral guise of care and responsibility. Said and other postcolonial theorists (see Narayan, 1995, for example) explain that colonialism was motivated and justified by a *colonist care discourse*, a self-serving paternalistic rhetoric that imbedded in the colonial project in discourses of moral responsibility. Narayan (1995) explains:

“Pervasive racist stereotypes about the negative and inferior status of enslaved or colonized Others were used to both justify denial of the rights enjoyed by the colonizers, and to construct the colonized as childish and inferior subjects, in need of the paternalistic guidance and rule of their superiors.” (Narayan, 1995, p. 134)

However, Noblit (1993) and Toshalis (2012) point to the ways that ideologies of care are situated within power discourses. Goldstein and Lake (2000) pointed to the ways that a group of white, pre-service teachers described *care* as an intrinsic or “natural” trait “often expressed through ‘gentle smiles and warm hugs’” (cited in Toshalis, 2012, p. 5). “Such demonstrations of aesthetic care,” Toshalis writes, “can be a powerful vehicle for whiteness in that they present the carer as compassionate, personally connected, and committed while they sometimes position the cared-for as needy, deficient, and defective. In this way, the whiteness of care depends on an impoverished gaze toward the cared-for” (p. 5). Rolon-Dow (2005) asserts that “aesthetic, decontextualized care can be described as a form of racist care” (p. 97, cited by Toshalis, 2012). Ayotte and Husain (2005) writes that these paternalistic *care* discourses are also mobilized globally within neo-colonial projects in order to construct groups of people in Afghanistan (and

other regions, see Amar, 2011; Bhattacharyya, 2008; Ho, 2007; Wane, 2008) as “unsafe” and in need of “saving” by the West.

Summary

This chapter examined three primary discourses that students invoked when describing their final perceptions of *Persepolis*. These discourses point to a shift away from blatant Orientalist and neo-Orientalist perspectives, and instead mark a shift towards white liberal discourse which express a universalizing and color-blind belief (“We’re all the same”). However, despite this shift, the students still express a fear of “living in Iran” (“the bombings,” “the war,” the lack of governmental control, and the misogyny) and a satisfaction in living “here,” in the United States. They also expressed their desire to “feel more” while reading the book, pointing to a paternalistic approach of care. While the teacher included the text to challenge student’s existing stereotypes of the Middle East, the students finished reading the text with similar Orientalist perceptions of the Middle East that reified U.S. nationalism and national identity (“I’m so glad I live here”). However, students also picked up a new discourse or ‘color-evasiveness’ (“We’re all the same”) that, while well-meaning (Frankenburg, 1998), works as a ‘terministic filter’ that deflects attention from racial oppression and promotes White privilege. When I shared my preliminary findings with the teacher, she was frustrated that so many students described Iran as a violent, religiously extreme region. She wanted to know why the students complained about the text as “not being serious enough” and wanted to know of ways that she could teach the text differently. In the following chapter, I discuss discourses that the teacher brought to the text that shaped the students’ reading in profound ways. By identifying these discourses and proposing alternatives, I offered and hope to offer future teachers of *Persepolis* ways of approaching These findings point

to the importance of the teacher in framing the text and disrupting Orientalistic or neo-Orientalist discourses during a study of *Persepolis*, or other 'Middle Eastern' literature.

CHAPTER VIII: DURING THE READING: TEACHER DISCOURSES OF REPRESENTATION, SAMENESS, AND DIFFERENCE HELPED SHAPE STUDENT DISCOURSES

While Mrs. Patner is a critical educator who wanted to use *Persepolis* as a critical fiction within the English classroom, it wasn't enough. This chapter presents my interpretation of why *Persepolis* didn't function as a critical fiction for most of the students. First, I believe that Mrs. Patner's ability to use the text as a critical fiction was limited by the social practices of the classroom, including her historical approach to the text, limited understanding of the history and politics of Iran within larger global relationships, and self-perceived time constraints and limitations of student understanding. Secondly, I think that Mrs. Patner's unproblematic positionalality in reference to the text and her students helped facilitate her invocation of liberal Whiteness discourses of *representation, sameness, and difference* (Wiegman, 1999), which powerfully shaped the student's invocation and production of discourse during and after the class reading of *Persespolis*. This chapter examines how the teacher used discourses of representation, sameness, and difference to challenge and reify students' neo-Orientalist discourses, and how these discourses were picked up by students. I, also, contemplate possible reasons why Mrs. Patner, as a critical educator who included *Persepolis* to disrupt negative stereotypes about 'the Middle East,' was unable to disrupt students' negative perceptions of Iran and the Middle East.

"Once Mrs. Patner started explaining it, it was perfect": Teacher Positioning and Power of

Teacher Discourse

The students' limited familiarity with the historical and social background of Iran led to the students' reliance on Mrs. Patner's interpretation to make sense of the text. This student positioning, I perceived, gave more power to the teacher's discourses and allowed them to shape the students' discourses in significant ways. All of the focal students (100%) named the importance of Mrs. Patner's role in "explaining the book" during our weekly discussions. One student explained during our final interview:

KA: Any advice you have to give to teachers or students who read this book in the future; anything that you would—

FS1: Make sure that you understand it while you're reading it.

KA: Okay what do you mean, 'make sure you understand it'?

FS1: Because at first, I did not know what was going on and once Mrs. Patner started explaining it, it was perfect.

KA: Okay, so the teacher needs to do a really good job of explaining it?

FS1: Yeah.

Another student echoed the same opinion:

FS: I didn't think it was going to be a very good book because it was like comics and I'm usually not into that. I don't enjoy them. Like the only comics I read are short. Those are actually kind of like humorous to me but I was like a whole book of that I'm not sure I'm going to enjoy it. But I guess it was enjoyable because we read in the class and talked about it. If I had read it on my own it would have been a lot different because I wouldn't be able to fully understand everything.

KA: Yeah, what do you feel like you wouldn't have understood if you had read it on your own?

FS: Some of the events that weren't expressed out fully.

In both of these comments (and others like it), students referenced their inability to ‘understand’ the text without Mrs. Patner’s interpretation. In class, students frequently asked Mrs. Patner to “explain” an event or a reference. In many ways, Mrs. Patner was asked to take on the role of a “cultural interpreter” for the students. During a class discussion, the students outside of my focus group remarked on the teacher’s positionality in reference to their lack of understanding and how that made them feel:

Student 1: Who is that?

Mrs. Patner: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the President of Iran.

Student 2: How do you know how to pronounce that?

Mrs. Patner: I’ve practiced.

Student 3: How do you spell that?

Mrs. Patner: Here I’ll spell his name for you. I’ll show you.

Student 4: Mrs. Patner, you make me feel stupid.

Mrs. Patner: That’s not my intention. I do not intend to make you feel stupid.

As the students possessed a limited historical and contextual understanding of Iran, the students positioned the teacher as the source of knowledge on the book and her discourse played a more influential role in the reading and learning around the text. She relied on pedagogies like fact-based questioning that highlighted her expertise. The students relied on her expertise, however limited by her understanding of the historical and cultural context of the text.

In the sections below, I highlight some of the most prominent discourses that were invoked during class discussions and focal student interviews. I use excerpts of class discussions to highlight how the teacher's positioning and discourses informed and shaped the students' perceptions of Iran, themselves, and the United States. Findings point to the role of teacher discourse around *Persepolis*, and texts from unfamiliar regions.

"I Want to Expose Them to the Middle East": Textual Positioning and Situationally Constructed Academic Discourses

From the time I came to France in 1994, I was always telling stories about life in Iran to my friends. We'd see pieces about Iran on television, but they didn't represent my experience at all. I had to keep saying, "No, it's not like that there." I've been justifying why it isn't negative to be Iranian for almost twenty years. How strange when it isn't something I did or chose to be?
-Marjane Satrapi, "Why I Wrote *Persepolis*"

The following section highlights the teacher's learning objectives or learning goals for the *Persepolis* unit. I highlight two of her primary learning goals: which were 1) "that of Satrapi's" and 2) "to expose them to the Middle East...and Islam." I discuss how the second goal was rooted in a *representational* discourse that, while well-meaning, was in conflict with Satrapi's aim of sharing a counter-narrative or counter-story to dominant narratives about Iran. I interpret this conflict in aims as a site that makes the teaching of *Persepolis* as a critical fiction difficult.

In Marjane Satrapi's introduction to *Persepolis*, she writes that Iran is frequently discussed "in connection with fundamentalism, fanaticism, and terrorism" (p. 2). *Persepolis*, she explains, was written to show "that an entire nation should not be judged by the wrongdoings of a few extremists." In my early conversations with Mrs. Patner, she identified her primary

learning goal to be “Satrapi’s goal,” which she translated as to “expose kids to Islam and the Middle East” and “realize just because someone lives half-way around the world doesn’t mean that their lives are that different.” She also said that the unit was intended to develop the students’ abilities to “analyze texts,” which she defined as the ability “to answer questions using quotes from the text.”

While the teacher had the well-meaning aim of challenging negative stereotypes of ‘the Middle East’ and Islam, she interpreted and/or translated Satrapi’s aim, which was to introduce a counter-narrative or a ‘critical fiction,’ to speak back to dominant discourses about Iran, as a text that could “expose” her students to Islam and the Middle East; however, The teacher guided the students’ reading of the text through 20-25 minute periods of silent reading in class. During their reading, students were asked to answer guided reading comprehension questions to assess their understanding of the chapter. Ninety-eight percent (98%) of these questions were “factual detailed questions” (Farstrup and Samuels, 2002) that required at least one quote to support the students’ answer along with an MLA in-text citation. These questions were then discussed as a class. During these discussions, the teacher would often pose other questions, which frequently included “experience questions” that asked students to connect information in the text to their experience or knowledge base (Farstrup and Samuels, 2002). During this discussion time, students would also pose questions. Within this unit teaching structure, the teacher taught two sub-units exploring the veil and Islam. In these two sub-units, her aim was to “show that the veil is not always forced” and to “expose kids to Islam.” These sub-units are described in more detail in the Methodology section.

Given the importance of the teacher’s discourse during the literacy event, I begin by examining excerpts of dialogue that represent prominent teacher discourses frequently brought to

the text. I do not do so in order to identify this as a discourse emanating from this teacher alone. Instead, I hope to show that these discourses are embedded in the social, political, and institutional fabric of American society, and by recognizing and naming them we can *begin* to dismantle them (Goodman, 2011). I discuss how these discourses influenced the students' discourses during their reading of the novel and, in the next chapter, highlight how I perceived these discourses to influence the meanings students constructed. I address how the teacher, motivated by the best of intentions, repeatedly positioned the text as "representative of the Middle East," and, despite her attempt to show 'how similar the students are to Marjie,' she repeatedly identified how 'different' Iranian and Middle Eastern culture.

"A clear and accurate picture of Iran": Using Memoir as an Historical Text

The teacher repeatedly positioned *Persepolis* as a text that represented the Middle East. I argue that by positioning the memoir as capable of offering "a clear and accurate picture of Iran," the teacher invoked and produced an Orientalist discursive practice that privilege and sustain global dominance of white imperial subjects (Shome, 1997).

Marjane Satrapi and other literary scholars have described *Persepolis* as a memoir-in-comic-strips. A memoir is a sub-genre of autobiography that intends to explore a small part of the author's life. In the case of *Persepolis I*, or *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, Satrapi describes a small sub-set of her pre-teen and teenage life in Iran during the Cultural Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War. While the text engages with historical events that have been examined from various historical lenses (Berlatsky, 2012; Hiro, 1990; Karsh, 2002; Keddle, 2006; Kurzman, 2005; Parsa, 1999; Sreberry and Mohammadi, 1994), the text is not a *history* of these events, as it intends to portray the remembered experiences of one individual. While history itself is an ideologically-framed concept and memoir can undoubtedly inform the historical consensus-

building performed during a historical analysis, it can be problematic to approach memoir with the intention of learning about historical events. Unlike a historical examination, memoir fails to critically examine the positionality of the author and how their experiences inform their interpretation of historical events.

However, during the reading of *Persepolis*, the teacher (and later the students) repeatedly situated the text as history that could be used to teach students about Iran and the greater Middle East. Mrs. Patner treated the text as a representative text not only for “what Iran is like” but also the larger Middle East. I examine a few segments of conversation that display this *representational discourse* and discuss how it operated as a whiteness practice that constructed a representation of Iran.

In my conversations with Mrs. Patner, she highlighted how *Persepolis*, and other novels or memoirs, actually taught more about certain concepts, like Islam, than history textbooks:

KA: So, you mentioned a couple of times that you want this book to expose your students to Islam. Can you say more about that?

Mrs. Patner: Well, one thing that I love about the World Literature curriculum here at Hope Valley is that students get to learn about a variety of religions. When we read *Night*, we’ll talk about Judaism, and when they read *Things Fall Apart*, we’ll talk about polytheism. In their Odysseus unit, they learn about Greek mythology--which most of them know something about. During *Persepolis*, we get to talk about Islam--which not many of them know much about. They might have talked about Islam in their World History class, when they talked about World Religions. But, they didn’t go into depth and they didn’t get as good of a picture of it as they will by reading a novel or a book like a *Persepolis*.

KA: What about a novel will give them a better picture?

Mrs. Patner: Because it will actually show a person who is practicing Islam or Judaism or polytheism and what that looks like.

These “representational” discourses and specifically, that the text should challenge stereotypes that students held about the Middle East, framed the students reading experience and guided the teacher’s discourses along with the students throughout the beginning of the project. For example, in the introductory lesson, the teacher asked the students to reflect on the following image:

Image 1. Security forces confront university students, 1978-79 Iranian revolution.



Printed in *Newsweek*, November 20, 1978

[Above photograph displayed on the projector]

Mrs. Patner: Take a few minutes and write down what you think of when you hear the word “Revolution.”

[Students write down words for three minutes.]

Mrs. Patner: Before we look at the words you thought of, I want us to look at this picture.

What do you see in this picture?

Student 1: Soliders.

Student 2: Guns.

Mrs. Patner: OK. Good.

Student 3: Some people standing at a gate.

Student 4: A photographer.

Mrs. Patner: Great- a photographer. People standing at a gate. Why do you think there are some people standing at a gate?

[Silence]

Because they want to get in somewhere.

Mrs. Patner: OK.

Student 6: I don't know. There's some guy climbing the fence. He doesn't look like he's trying to get in.

Student 7: Yes, he does.

Mrs. Patner: OK. So there's a guy climbing over the fence. It looks like he could be either trying to get in or get out. Where do you think they're trying to get in or get out?

[Silence]

Mrs. Patner: What if I told you that they were trying to get into a school?

[Silence. Some students look confused].

Mrs. Patner: So, this is a picture taken during the Cultural Revolution. When we read Persepolis, we'll learn more about this.

[No one raises their hand].

Mrs. Patner: The Cultural Revolution was a violent time in Iran’s history when the leaders of Iran decided to close down the schools and enforce a lot of strict laws that kept people from doing things like going to college or going to school like they used to. For the next few weeks, we’re going to learn more about this event in Iran’s history and how it can help us understand the Middle East today. What do you think of when you hear the word “Revolution”?

In this early discussion around *Persepolis*, the teacher positioned the text as a means of understanding or learning about the Cultural Revolution, as a means of understanding “the Middle East” today. Students picked up the teacher’s discourses to position the book as “history.”

Mapping the Middle East: Constructing Geographies of Conflict

The teacher discursively constructed an imagined geography of the Middle East that was “different” and “conflict ridden.” For example, as the students were starting the book, the teacher quizzed the students on their geographical understandings of a region traditionally associated with the Middle East. She passed out a blank map, including countries traditionally associated with the Middle East. The teacher had the students take an ungraded quiz, which required them to name the countries on a map of the Middle East in groups of three or four.

When the teacher reviewed the map, she highlighted some regions as “more Middle Eastern” and “less” so, emphasizing characteristics that she associated with the region that also constructed an imagined geography of the region:

Mrs. Patner: Oman and Yemen are the ones that are down on the gulf coast here. You remember that there was a Gulf of Oman. That might have helped.

The little countries down in here were Qatar and Bahrain. Qatar being the bigger one here, Bahrain is the little tiny island. Okay? Obviously you guys can see Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, I wasn't really expecting that many people would get Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kurdistan correct. We tend to kind of forget about them. But they are technically also part of the Middle East. They're not usually involved in a lot of the same conflicts as the rest of these countries are.

So India might have helped you, if you knew where India was that might have helped you remember Pakistan because the two of them are always...

Student4: Together.

Student7: Fighting.

Mrs. Patner: Because of religious differences. Okay? I was actually kind of surprised that the map that I found for the Middle East did not include Egypt and some of these other countries that we tend to associate with a lot of the conflicts and goings on that happen around.

Mrs. Patner provided an interesting dichotomy between the "Middle Eastern" countries, the Middle Eastern countries that we "tend to kind of forget about" but that are "technically also part of the Middle East" and countries that we "tend to associate with a lot of the conflicts" but that weren't included in the map. In employing this type of language, she is constructing a Middle East that is defined both by its regional arrangement and its association with conflict, perpetuating neo-Orientalist discourses which position the Middle East and other subaltern regions as conflict-ridden and violent.

When a student questioned the need to know the geography of the Middle East she explained:

Student9: Why are we learning this?

Mrs. Patner: For me, it seems to me that if you're going to read a book, whatever that book is you're not going to understand as much about it if you don't have a context for where it's happening and what is happening in that country. So the fact that you can see up here where Iran is, that it's in the midst of all this kind of conflict that helps you establish a context for the story and know what is going on around Iran that also gives and colors our impression of Iran today. Right? Does that make sense? So I like to establish a physical setting not just the setting in the story. I want you to see the location of Iran compared to the rest of the world because it is important and it is very important today too. Iran has been involved in a lot of conflict recently. What's been going on in Iran? They did something they're not supposed to do.

Student13: I don't know.

Student4: Nuclear testing.

Mrs. Patner: Yes, nuclear testing. Okay? Very good!

Student3: Why can't they do nuclear testing?

Mrs. Patner: So basically Lizzy, there is a club of people who are allowed to have nuclear weapons. Iran is not in the club because they are considered unstable and a threat to international peace. We just know that the Middle East is always fighting. We just don't know why and what's going on."

Here, the value of learning about the geography of the Middle East is placed in the context of (a) understanding the (geographical) context of the book and (b) specifically, that "it's in the midst

of all this kind of conflict that helps you establish a context for the story.” In this early geographical discussion of the region, she further constructs an imagined geography of the Middle East that is defined through conflict and frames the story of *Persepolis* as valuable because it both helps students see “that it’s in the midst of all this kind of conflict that helps you establish a context for the story and know what is going on around Iran that also gives and colors our impression of Iran today.” No other context about Iran, its history, or its relationship with neighboring countries was provided.

I had a conversation with Mrs. Patner about the history and events informing the Cultural Revolution, particularly focusing on the history of colonialism and the events surrounding Reza Shah’s take down. I, also, shared a video created by the BBC that provided a nuanced history of the events that precipitated the Reza Shah’s removal from power. The teacher shared that she was unfamiliar with any of these events, but started to pick up some of this discourse within her classroom to explain the historical context of the events surrounding the Cultural Revolution.

“It’s so Different”

While the teacher repeatedly used discourses of sameness during the class reading of *Persepolis*, she also frequently used discourses of difference to construct an imagined geography of Iran, the Middle East, and the United States. For example, in discussions early in the study, the teacher described *Persepolis* as a book that she decided to teach primarily because it was “different”:

KA: I know that you have been teaching this book for the past three years. Can you tell me more about why you chose to teach *Persepolis* for the first time? And what you wanted your students to learn?

Mrs. Patner: I actually heard about *Persepolis* for the first time as a pre-service teacher at a local English teacher’s conference. We got to go to some of the

scheduled activities and whatnot, and another teacher and I chose to go to a session that was called the Axis of Evil, Literature from the Axis of Evil. And we were like, “This sounds awesome!” And that’s where we heard about Persepolis and the fact that people were teaching this book in our classes and I think the reason we attached ourselves to Persepolis so much at the beginning was because it was so different. Not just because it was an Axis of Evil book, but also because it’s a graphic novel--and we usually don’t get to teach those in any level of English really. It’s kind of an abnormal thing for us to do. It appealed to us for both of those reasons. And in terms of why I chose to teach it? A lot of was the exposure issue. Exposing kids in Franklin County to Islam, exposing them to the Middle East in general. Most of what they knew about the Middle East was “that guy is a towelhead.” Seriously. I heard that multiple times. So, it was mostly to develop exposure and maturity in the students. And realizing just because someone lives half-way around the world doesn’t mean that their lives are that different.

KA: In what way did it change when you started teaching it here [in Hope County]?

Mrs. Patner: Persepolis is not required by Hope County. It’s not required by the early IB Program. We don’t have a ‘Unit Plan’ for it, so I fit it in where I can. We’re pushing to put this in a “War Novel” or as a “Story of War” instead of *Things Fall Apart*. Because there is not a lot of war in that book--I

mean, there is a war of culture. But it's not like Iraq is bombing Iran.

There is talk of that, but we haven't.

Mrs. Patner explains that she originally was interested in *Persepolis* because it was so “different,” both in its topic (“Literature from the Axis of Evil”) and form (a graphic novel). She says that she chose to teach *Persepolis* to “expose” students to Islam and “the Middle East in general” with a group of students whose knowledge about the Middle East was limited to the epithet: “This guy is a towelhead.” She also re-iterates her intention to use *Persepolis* to help students “realize” that “just because someone lives half-way around the world doesn't mean that their lives are that different.” These statements not only conflate Iran and the Middle East, but they also position *Persepolis* as a representative text from which students can learn more “about Islam” and “about the Middle East in general” (an existing student discourse). The teacher also describes the text as a “story of war,” echoing students' existing neo-Orientalist discourses of the Middle East as a conflict-ridden region.

The teacher repeatedly conflated Iran with the larger “Middle East” and described the two regions as “very different” with “ideologies” that are “very foreign” to the American Dream:

Mrs. Patner: It sounds easy, but then again, we're not part of that system. It's not what we were brought up and raised to believe. Our system is completely different. The whole American dream is that you can take – you can be nothing and become something. It's just, it's a very different ideology. Because we don't have that type of system ingrained into us, it seems very different and very foreign. It seems like there's an obvious solution to this, right? It's not quite that simple. You're not just talking about changing the mind of one person. You're talking about a whole country that has done

this for thousands of years. Does that make sense? It's hard. It's hard to change a system like this.

The teacher continued to position Iran as a “country far, far away.”

Lizzie: Okay, so this social class thing, they put something on them to show their lower social class? Because, otherwise, how would you know each other's social classes?

Mrs. Patner: This is a really good question. This is something that is not a problem just in Iran, but in some other countries in the world. If you guys think of – there's a really famous country, or a country that's really famous for having issues with social class.

Lydia: India

Mrs. Patner: India, yeah. What is that system called, do you guys know? Caste system, caste with an e on the end. Very good, Lydia

Lydia: Then they say like, if your karma is good to you, maybe you'll get –

Mrs. Patner: That is totally different. We'll talk about that later. We'll talk about karma and nirvana and reaching, well karma is all about what you do to others. Karma is not an entity that decides things.

Student16: You sure you're teaching nirvana?

Student7: Yes, we'll talk about reincarnation.

Mrs. Patner: For right now, what I want you to focus on is not that – what I want you to see is that Lizzie, the answer to your question about whether this is something that goes on your birth certificate, first of all, most governments don't have – most non-western governments don't have the

same type of records that we have. First of all, birth certificates in India, totally different from what a birth certificate is like here. We have some basic information that's the same, but it's not treated in this same level of not necessarily privacy and not necessarily the same level of, how can I say this –

Student8: Importance.

Mrs. Patner: Kind of. The short answer to your question is no. It's not something that is stamped on your birth certificate or your passport or something like that. It is something that is passed down traditionally from generation to generation to generation. If you were to go to India today, you would see people and you would be able to tell that they were working in this lower caste or this lower class of the social ladder. They would be able to tell you, "I am part of this." If you were to look at their birth certificate, it's not going to say that. It's kind of – it's very much a socially enforced system. The people enforce the system because if you're not in the lowest class, you want the system to stay the same. Why?

Student9: If there's actually Revolution and everything changes he'll lose his maid and his Cadillac and –

Mrs. Patner: Bingo. Does that make sense? It's very much a tradition and very much a traditional and socially reinforced thing. It's not something that the government is going to crack down on you if you are in a lower caste and you marry above. Local government is a little bit different. There are places in India, I was actually listening on the radio this morning. I was

hearing about – I don't know if you guys heard about this major rape case in Delhi. Big issue, a woman from the lowest class was actually raped, gang raped on the bus in Delhi. The men who were responsible, haven't been charged. There hasn't really been a trial. There hasn't been a lot of public outcry about this, but there hasn't been, the government really hasn't done anything to like step in and say okay this is wrong because it's such a socially accepted thing but because she's from the lowest class, they can rape her if she wants.

By positioning the book as “about a country far, far away,” she uses representational discourses to accentuate Iran’s physical distance from the United States, insinuating that this difference in location also translates into a difference in values (that might not be interesting or intelligible to some students). In this particular discussion, “issues of social class” in the book are situated in contexts outside of the United States (Iran and India). “Most non-Western countries” are positioned as “not having the same types of records that we have,” and there is no discussion of how social class informs experiences in the United States.

By emphasizing the social problems of “non-Western countries” while neglecting to address some of the United States’s different social problems and how those are historically and socially rooted, the teacher perpetuates a deficit perspective of the “non-West” that both constructs and masks America and whiteness not worthy of examination.

Sameness: They’re Just Like Us

The teacher repeatedly used discourses of “sameness” to challenge student conceptions that Iranians and “Middle Easterners” were “extremely different.” While her intentions were informed by a benevolent desire to challenge students’ stereotypes of the Middle East, I argue

that by using “sameness discourses” (particularly related to the topics she mentioned), she perpetuated a Whiteness discourse that universalizes White values and perceptions. It also situates the American subject as the desired norm to which other cultures are compared and judged. Such an approach to examining Iran, and global regions more broadly, neglects to examine how power and White privilege influence the complex global-relationships that inform the events featured in Satrapi’s memoir and, in turn, I argue colonizes the textual terrain.

Islam: It’s Like Christianity

One of the primary ways that the teacher attempted to challenge the students’ stereotypes about the Middle East was through what I term the normalization of Islam. I argue that this discourse of sameness is rooted in a whiteness discourse of universalism, or the assumption that values held primarily by Whites or Americans (in which whiteness is the dominant discourse, Frankenberg, 1993) are normal and widely shared. This discursive move erases difference by refusing to acknowledge the experiences and ideals of others and communicates that those who do not conform to white ideals are justifiably marginalized (Moore, Pandian, and Kosek, 2003).

In the early weeks of reading *Persepolis*, the teacher shared a PowerPoint on the five pillars of Islam. She did this in order to “give the students some context for the book.” The five pillars of Islam (arkān-al-Islām أركان الإسلام; also arkān ad-dīn أركان الدين "pillars of the “religion”) are five basic acts (belief, worship, charitable giving, fasting during the month of Ramadan, and the pilgrimage to Mecca) that are considered the foundation of Muslim life. While they are not mentioned in the Qu’ran, they are summarized in the famous hadith of Gabriel, and are considered obligatory by most Muslim believers. In the following passage, the teacher describes the third pillar, charitable giving, and compares it to the Christian tithe.

Mrs. Patner: Muslims must give 2.5 percent of their annual income to charity. Notice this is not to the church, or to the mosque. This is to charity, interesting. Okay? In Christianity, we handle it differently... Raise your hand if you know how much Christians have to give every year.

Student A: Ten percent.

Mrs. Patner: Ten percent. And what do we call that?

Student B: Tithe.

Mrs. Patner: A tithe, okay? So, a little bit different. And, a tithe goes, Gina, to the church, not to charity, okay, so that the church can, hypothetically, divide it up and give some to charity, hypothetically as they will, hypothetically. Different churches do it differently. But, that is the biblical statement. Okay?

In this passage, the teacher explains the practice of زكاة (zakat), the third pillar of Islam, which instructs Muslims to give 2.5% of their earnings to the poor. In the Qu'ran, zakat operates as a way to redistribute wealth in a community, with a particular interest directed toward the poor and dispossessed Muslims. In the class conversation, the teacher emphasizes that zakat is not given to the “church” or the “mosque,” interchanging the Christian and Muslim terms for a space of worship; instead, she shares, Muslims give 2.5% of their earnings to charity. She refers to Christians as “we” and uses Christian discourses to both normalize the Islamic religious practice of zakat and expound on the “Biblical” perspective of tithing with the class.

Later, at the end of the presentation, she normalizes Christianity again by discussing the similarities between Islam and Christianity:

Mrs. Patner: So, questions about the five pillars? Okay. I think every single one of you kids, there is something very similar in being every major monotheistic religion, but I think you can relate every single one of these pillars to something in Christianity. I think you can relate every single one of these pillars to something in Judaism. Okay? Would you guys agree with that?

Student: Yeah.

Mrs. Patner: Okay. So, I think it's very interesting that these things are so similar. And, a lot of times what we hear on the news, right, makes this religion seem so dramatically different from what we're used to. But, at the same time, these are the basic principles. And, there's a theme as the basic principles that we have as Christians. Okay? Does that make sense? Okay. So, this is the basis. This is the heart of being a Muslim.

The aim of the teacher's PowerPoint presentation was to challenge "what we hear on the news" which "makes [Islam] seem so dramatically different from what we're used to." She attempted to challenge the students' preconceived notions about Islam by emphasizing what the students could "relate to" (this phrase is mentioned twice). She emphasizes the "similarity" to Judeo-Christian beliefs. By engaging with these sameness discourses, she is challenging dominant, Islamophobic discourses which situate Islam as an extreme religion that contradicts and threatens other (primarily Western) religious values; however, by situating Christianity as the normalized "we" against an Islamic "they," the teacher reconstitutes a problematic Orientalist dichotomy that situates Christianity as the dominant discourse against which Islam can be validated. Similarly, later, as the students started reading the text, the teacher used Christian discourses to

both challenge students' (potential) assumptions that Islam is a religion that is uniquely
"oppressive to women."

In the text being referenced, Marji, the main character, expresses her desire to be a prophet. "I was born with religion," the character says, "At the age of six, I was already sure I was the last prophet." Marji's comment is provocative, as most Muslims believe that Muhammed was God's last and final prophet. Additionally, most Muslims reserve the term "prophet" to describe certain male messengers of God; most female spiritual leaders are described as "messengers" or "companions of the prophet." In the visual text, Marji is standing next to a line of male prophets with the question over their heads: "A woman?"

Mrs. Patner: What makes her different from all the others?

Student: She's a woman.

Mrs. Patner: She's a woman, okay? This is also something that is pretty similar to Christianity. In Christianity, you know that we have lots of male patriarchs, lots of male prophets. There are a few women included there, there are a couple. Can anybody tell me the female books of the Bible?

Student: Ruth.

[Talk over]

Mrs. Patner: We got one, we got Ruth. Ester?

Student: Oh yeah.

Mrs. Patner: Ester; yes, that's a girl's name. That's two. That's it. Yeah quite impressive, right?

In this conversation, the teacher makes a discursive move to highlight Marji's unique to desire to be a Muslim prophet (What makes her different from the others? She's a woman.) and uses Christian discourses to preemptively challenge potential student readings that could affirm dominant narratives that "Islam is oppressive to women." She says: "This is also something that is pretty similar to Christianity. In Christianity, you know that we have lots of male patriarchs, lots of male prophets. There are a few women included there, there are a couple." She asks her students to list some female books of the Bible--interestingly, neither of the women mentioned (Ruth or Esther) are considered by most theologians to be prophetesses.⁷ However, she makes this discursive move to highlight the similarities between the few female prophets exist in Christianity ("That's two. That's it.") to the lack of female prophets in Islam.

Later, she draws comparisons between Satrapi's representation of God ("God has a giant beard," "as a man," "grandfatherly") and "all the major world religions." She says that most world religions of monotheism depict "God, as a man" and "a grandfatherly like fellow in some ways." She even moves to say that "as a little kid, that's probably what I thought God would look like."

By making these moves, the teacher hopes to challenge dominant discourses that situate Islam as something that is "different" or "unlike" the students' worldviews. However, in doing so, she both normalizes Christianity (and other monotheistic religions) and encourages a problematic

⁷ The six women expressly stated to possess the title of prophetess in the Bible are: Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, Noadiah, Isaiah's wife, and Anna.

reading based on “empathetic identification” (Burwell, et. al., 2008). As Burwell and her colleagues explain:

“Empathic identification implicitly perceives the Other through assumed similarities with the Self, erasing differences while promising to honour it...This is to say that empathetic identification sees only the sameness and commonalities (some true, others fanciful) between the reader and textual Other while overlooking key differences (say of power, privilege, location and differing cultural values and history). Thus, even if well-intended, empathetic identification is actually unethical; it is a one-sided venture, neither symmetrical or reciprocal. Further, it gives us the false impression that we “know” and “understand” the Other--and behind this, that we truly know ourselves” (69-70).

The use of Christian (and broadly religious) discourses to “normalize” Islam can also be interpreted as a colonial and whiteness practice. Christianity and whiteness both played (and play) an influential role in British colonization projects and American imperialism project. When she discusses veiling, she compares women’s different attitudes towards veiling by comparing them to different Christian traditions:

“In some places, like you said, it is something that is required. Women are expected to wear it. And in more conservative denominations, right. It’s just like here, we have differences. Like one Methodist church might be more liberal than another Methodist church. I know that’s a fact because my parents go to a very conservative Methodist church, and I’ve attended a very liberal Methodist church. So, I mean, even in the same denomination, there can be differences. So that’s true everywhere. And it’s important to realize it’s the same history with Islam. There are always going to be different interpretations and different people who respond, believe different things about what is said in the Koran.”

In this excerpt, she highlights that Iran is “just like here.” She uses Christian language about “denominations” and differences within denominations to emphasize the differences “everywhere.” Here, she is constructing an imagined geography of the United States (“here”) where Christianity plays a similar role as Islam. She says that “it’s the same history with Islam.” In presenting the history this way, she continues to position US/Christian discourses as the valid discourse.

Marji is just like me and you

Another way that the teacher constructed an unproblematic American subject position was through the normalization or use of sameness discourse in regards to Marji’s experience. The teacher repeatedly asked the students to discuss how Marji’s experiences were similar their own; however, in doing so, she only highlighted specific similarities that relate primarily to Western adolescent experiences (including individuation from parents and increased connections to peers) (Brown et al., 2002) which produced Whiteness discourses of universalism and individualism. Some examples of how these discourses were used are highlighted below.

After reading a chapter that highlighted Marji’s growing resistance to her mother’s household rules (summarized in the text above), the teacher prompted a discussion where students were asked to draw comparisons between Marji’s life and their own.

Teacher: She's starting to question her parents' beliefs. You guys are old enough you started questioning your parents and a lot of their decisions.

Student: When they say, “Because I said so.” Well, why did you because you say so?

Student: Because I pay your bills.

Mrs. Patner: Anyway, but you guys get this. She's going to be going through a lot of the same things that you guys are going through. Are you guys finding that you relate to Margie and some of the things that she's experiencing? I realize that you guys haven't grown up in a culture that has been through an extreme revolution nor have you lived under a government that literally controls everything. Not quite there. Does that – do you guys still see similarities between your own life and hers?

In this segment of the talk, the teacher tells the students that Marji's experience is similar to "what you guys are going through" and asks students to identify similarities between their life and the novel's character; however, she prefaces the conversation by recognizing that "you guys haven't grown up in a culture that has been through an extreme revolution nor have you lived under a government that controls everything." First, by foregrounding how Marji's experiences are similar to what they experience (as opposed to how their experiences are similar to what the character experiences), the teacher is using an "empathic" discourse that privileges and neutralizes the reading subject. In doing so, the teacher's student reader becomes the base for comparison (situating their culture as superior, against which other cultures can be measured). However, she simultaneously constructs a discourse of a homogenous "Iranian culture" that negates the variety of languages and social practices within Iran. Through this discursive move, she creates a juxtaposition between their culture and our culture. By limiting the similarities that the students should draw and placing the political movements and government control off-limits, positioning the political and governmental structure in Persepolis as "extreme" and the United States's government and political events as "not extreme" and unworthy of critical examination or comparison. She also is relying on global whiteness discourse of universalism that highlight

commonalities across cultures, a discursive move that masks privilege, sustains the dominance of white ‘subjects,’ and neglects to address the complex factors that inform the geopolitical social structures.

At several points throughout the reading of the book, the teacher asks the students to discuss how Marji’s experiences are similar to their own. Later in the class discussion, the students engaged in the following discussion:

Student: I mean, kind of like, her being serious about the war and reenacting all that stuff. When I was little, me and my brother would pretend that we were in the Civil War and we would always act out and all that stuff. I can also kind of relate to her about being a prophet because when I was little I didn't want to be a prophet or anything but I kept saying I wanted to be Sabrina the Teenage Witch.

In this excerpt, you can see the student following the teacher’s advice and searching for similarities between their life and hers. This student chooses to focus on the similarities between Marji’s imitation of war and her reenactment of the Civil War when she little. While both were imitating violent experiences, a key difference between Marji’s experience and the students’ is that this student was reenacting a war that took place over 150 years ago in the United States between the North and the South. Marji is less “reenacting” and more so “mimicking” or “mirroring” the conflict between Iran and Iraq that she is experiencing. The conflation of these different “imitations” (one written from the privilege of reflecting on a war that was 150 years ago, which this white student benefited from and the other from mirroring the events around her) privilege the reading subject and make the character a means of substantiating their position. Similarly, the student says that she can “kind of relate” to Marji’s desire to be a prophet, comparing that desire to her childhood wish to be “Sabrina the Teenage Witch,” a character from

an American sitcom who had magical witch powers. In this instance, the student is comparing Marji's desire to be a spiritual leader in the Islamic faith to a fictional television character with magical powers. In making this discursive move, the student is comparing the religious calling of an individual to her childhood desire to be a television character; a connection that minimizes the role of religion in Marji's life and other prophets of the Islamic faith.

Similarly, another student describes how she used to pretend to be in a band with her friends:

Student A: My neighbor in fourth grade, Candace and I were in a group that we called the Cheetah Girls. We wanted to be the Cheetah Girls. We called ourselves their names. We were so legit about it. We would sing in front of our class. Trevor was really scared to sing, so she just laughed.

Mrs. Patner: Imitation, everybody does it at some point.

This student built off of the previous students' comparison between her war "re-enactment" and transitioned this act to "pretending." The difference between imitation, re-enactment, and pretending are quite stark; however, the teacher privileges their similarities.

The students also compared their experiences to the tensions Marji experiences with her parents:

Student A: When I was ten, I wanted to be just like my mom. When I started acting like her, I 11, 12, and 13 was when I started realizing that her life was not so good. That's kind of like what she's realizing about. She's trying to be like her parents and then she's realizing that her parents aren't who she thought they were when she was little.

Mrs. Patner: They're not perfect.

Student B: Even now parents don't take us as seriously as they should. We have opinions and they just don't listen as openly as they should. I'm in this

group at church and it's half adults. There's a majority of adults and then two youth members in there. It's like youth counsel, kind of like school counsel but it's like a youth counsel I guess to talk about the youth group. When I share my opinion, I can say one thing, but unless another adult agrees, they don't take it seriously. Even my parents, they don't take people, like me and my sister's opinion as seriously as another adult, even if it's the exact same opinion.

Mrs. Patner: I think you're right. I think Margi struggles a lot with that. That will continue to happen. You'll see that problem get worse from here on out I think...

Student C: I can really relate to the hypocrite thing. When I hit teenage years, my mom was like, alright, you're not a teenager, we're going to start treating you differently, we're going to start expecting you to do different stuff. Then when I start making the mistakes I'm supposed to make as a teenager, it's like, what happened to treating me as an adult. Now they are treating me like an adult, now they're treating me like a child and everything that they said they weren't going to do because I'm a teenager. They're like really critical when it comes to me getting in trouble. Then doing good things, like, "Oh, this is how we expected you to act." Then when I act like a kid, "Oh, so you wanted to go back to acting like a kid, good one."

Student A: It's like, Shanice was saying about parents being strict about treating me like an adult when I get older. My mom, ever since I was like 12 years old,

she was like, when you turn 16 you're allowed to go out on dates on your own and you can do this and this, blah, blah, blah. Now that I'm 16 now I'm like, "Mom can I go out on a date?" She's like, "No." She won't let my sister go, she won't let me go, and we're 16 and she totally like, she said she would do something and she totally just didn't do it. Like we aren't allowed to go on dates alone, we have to go on group dates.

Mrs. Patner: Rules, hypocrites, they all relate to these things.

The students' use Marji's disagreements with her parents as an opportunity to voice their frustrations with their parents. In only the first instance does someone make a comparison to Marji's experience (perhaps emphasizing the narcissism of the empathic reading position), but the teacher makes a point of emphasizing the similarities between these conflicts and Marji's experience: "Rules, hypocrites, they all relate to these things." Here, she is emphasizing that they (Iranian teenagers, including Marji) can "relate to all of [your]" concerns about parental rules and hypocrisy. In doing so, she problematically homogenizes the experiences of all Iranian teenagers (they), along with the American students', and universalizes her students' concerns about parents and hypocrisy.

Mrs. Patner: It goes back to what Amy was saying and what Stephanie was saying. At what point is the control yours and at what point is it your parents? That fight is when it is universal. I mean, that is every child with every parent. There has to be a point where you guys are going to – one of you is going to take over the relationships. It's usually, in the beginning, it's the parents that are in control. Then eventually that shift has to come whether it comes before you're 18 or after, it's going to be there. No matter what though,

there's always a grey area in between. Who's really in control of this, and who's really in control of that too. Very good. I'm glad that you guys find that you can relate to Margie. That's good.

The teacher highlights that this tension between a child and his/her parents is universal: “I mean that is every child with every parent.” However, as Brown, et. al (2009) have highlighted in their research, adolescence is not experienced universally. Even within the United States, children don’t always experience a tension with their parents. Specifically, this phenomenon is documented less often in regions traditionally associated with the Middle East (Brown, 2009). This discursive move is another example of universalism whiteness discourse that attempts to “unify,” but actually normalizes whiteness as the “invisible human universal” (Frankenberg, 1997a:2).

Summary

This chapter examines how the teacher used discourses of representation, sameness, and difference to challenge and reify students’ neo-Orientalist discourses, and how these discourses were picked up by students. These findings point to the importance of teacher discourse and framing around the teaching of *Persepolis* and other “Middle Eastern” literature.

CHAPTER 9: “IT’S JUST LIKE EGYPT”: EGYPTIAN-AMERICAN COUNTER-NARRATIVE MEDIATED BY *PERSEPOLIS*

“When my eighth-grade teacher ... shared Mildred Taylor’s Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry with the class and added several pieces of black literature to the classroom library, it was a pivotal moment for me. For the first time in my life, I realized that I was not alone in the world. There were other black girls having experiences similar to mine, and some had grown up and written them down. I began to write mine down too, with hopes of becoming a writer” (Hinton and Berry, 2005, p. 284).

“[W]e cannot overestimate the power of seeing (or not seeing) oneself in literature.” (Hughes-Hassell, 2013).

Counter-storytelling, a central tenant of critical race theory (CRT), seeks to challenge dominant narratives of Whiteness by sharing “a story that aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority” (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001). In other words, counter-storytelling exposes and critiques dominant cultural discourses that perpetuate racial stereotypes and systemic racism. This discourse gives voice to the concerns and perceptions of marginalized groups, and “invite(s) the reader into a new and unfamiliar world” that allows one to see “what life is like for others” (Delgado & Stefancic, p. 41).

This chapter describes how one Egyptian-student, Ishaq, used *Persepolis* to mediate and construct a counter-story that spoke back to anti-Arab discourses. This chapter describes Ishaq’s reading process and how *Persepolis* was used to mediate and develop a more public, Egyptian

and Muslim identity that facilitated counter-storytelling against neo-Orientalist and postcolonial Whiteness discourses that position Arab individuals negatively. While his appropriation of *Persepolis* as a counter-story homogenized the Middle East, his use of *Persepolis* to construct a counter-story also helped him develop a ‘good reader’ identity, supporting the work of culturally responsive literature integration in the high school English classroom (Alvermann, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1998, 2002, 2006).

Ishaq

“Did you get the mix I sent you last night?” Ishaq asks with a smile as we sit down for lunch. Ishaq tugs at his white polo shirt as we talk about the Bruno Mars cover he just recorded. For the past six months, Ishaq has been one of ten students that I’ve been meeting with over lunch to better understand the literacy and social practices of learners around *Persepolis*. Ishaq was born in Cairo, Egypt where his parents grew up and lived until his family moved to the United States for his father’s business. When he moved to the United States at the age of 3, neither he nor his parents or any of his three older siblings knew English. Over the past six weeks, he has shared his passion for recording music, his interest in engineering, and his schooling experiences as a native-Arabic speaking ESL student. He shares stories with me of what it’s like to go back to Egypt--how it is much more “free” and the joy of being near his extended family. Ishaq is the only Egyptian students at the school and one of three students who identifies as Muslim. In his English class, he is the only student who identifies as Arab.

“But Sometimes He Likes to Use a Terrorist Accent”: Teacher Positioning of Ishaq

In my early conversations with my teacher partner, Ishaq was singled out and identified as a student that would be of interest to me (as a researcher) because of his Egyptian heritage.

Her description provides insight into how Ishaq performed his Egyptian-identity in his high school English class before the study began. The teacher explained:

Mrs. Patner: I have an Egyptian student in on of the Paideia classes and you'll get to meet him on Thursday. His name is Ahmed. And on the first day I tried to call him Ee-shahck, like with an accent, he was like "No, don't call me that. It's Isaac." And I was "Alright. Okay, cool."

KA: [Smirk with a look of surprise].

Mrs. Patner: But sometimes he likes to use a terrorist accent in class and that can be an issue.

KA: [Look of shock]. He'll actually call it a terrorist accent?

Mrs. Patner: Oh yes, that's what he says. And we talk about perpetuating stereotypes and how that happens so we'll get there. But yes, so in terms of Muslim students, I'm thinking if Ishaq is Muslim. I don't think he is, actually. If he is, he's not – his family's not hardcore practicing or anything like that so I'm not sure. Last year I taught a Muslim student in Paideia but he is the only Muslim student I've had so far to my knowledge. But I know we do have – it's a small population but we do have Muslim students here for sure. And one thing that's neat about the IB program is that student's that are studying here out from abroad tend to gravitate towards the IB schools since they can still get accreditation that will be valid in other countries. Last year I had two students from the U.K. and trying to think, this year I don't think I have anybody who's not from the United States originally except for Ishaq who's from Egypt. That's it. And he is not – I'm not

sure that he's planning to do IB or anything. I think his entire family moved here but now they're moving back to Egypt this summer.

This conversation points to important ways that Mrs. Patner perceived Ishaq's Egyptian and Muslim identities (or his performance of this identity) before the study began and how we was positioned in our early conversations. Mrs. Patner identifies Ishaq as Egyptian, which she perceives will interest me since he was the only student identified. While she doesn't mention how she learned he was Egyptian, she also makes a point to situate him in a certain posture towards his "Egyptian-ness." She highlights that he prefers an "Americanized" pronunciation of his name. She also mentions that he uses a "terrorist accent," which she says perpetuates stereotypes in the class. She doesn't know if he is Muslim, but "if he is...his family's not hardcore practicing or anything like that." These comments appeared to situate Ishaq as a highly-"Americanized," Egyptian student who borders on being a "bad Egyptian" (he uses a terrorist accent). These comments provide insight into both the teacher's position and Ishaq's public identification as an Egyptian and Muslim prior to the *Persepolis* unit.

Constructing a "Middle Eastern" Discourse

In my first conversations with Ishaq, before reading *Persepolis*, Ishaq started constructing an imagined geography of the Middle East and a "Middle Eastern identity" that he used to position himself in certain ways during our lunch discussions of *Persepolis*. During our first meeting, I asked him to tell me about himself and he told me that his family had immigrated to the United States from Egypt when he was three years old. He shared that his family was going to move back to Egypt next year so that his dad could start a business. It was obvious that his Egyptian identity was a source of pride, but he also hedged it by saying that he primarily identified as American:

- KA:** So, tell me about your family.
- Ishaq:** I have two brothers and a sister. I was born in Egypt. So were my parents and my siblings. But, we moved here when I was three.
- KA:** Are your siblings younger or older?
- Ishaq:** I'm the youngest.
- KA:** Oh, you're the baby!
- Ishaq:** [smile] Yes.
- KA:** So, you mentioned that you're from Egypt. Would you call yourself Egyptian?
- Ishaq:** Yea, but I mean I'm pretty Americanized. I mean, I don't like have an accent. I wear American clothes.

In this conversation, Ishaq claims an Egyptian cultural heritage; however, he makes a point to situate himself as an “Americanized Egyptian.” He points to his lack of an accent and his clothing as evidence. When I asked him why he decided to participate in the focal student interviews, he explained with a smile: “Well, the book is Middle Eastern and I’m Egyptian...and I like to talk.” From this early conversation, Ishaq appeared to be constructing an imagined geography of the “Middle East” that he used to construct a “Middle Eastern” identity that encompassed his Egyptian-American identity.

They Called Him Osama

Prior to reading *Persepolis*, the teacher had the students watch the movie *Crash*, in order to draw comparisons between the racial profiling towards “African Americans, Latin@s, Whites, and Muslims.” One character in the movie, Farhad, is Persian and he and his family serve as one of the six featured families/characters. While little background is provided about Farhad and his

family, the movie has several excerpts where we get a limited picture of Farhad and his family members. Farhad and his family own a small shop. Early in the movie, the door on his shop breaks. A locksmith, one of the other characters in the movie, is called to replace the lock but he is unable to fix it due to a broken door jam. The locksmith informs Farhad that it will need to be replaced before he can fix the lock. Farhad doesn't replace the door jam and, soon after, Farhad's store is robbed. Farhad blames the robbery on the locksmith and later threatens his life at his home. Over the course of the movie, several racial epithets are thrown towards Farhad, several of which problematically position Arabs as terrorists. During class, Mrs. Patner was clear to differentiate between Farhad's nationality as Iranian/Persian and Arabs.

[Teacher stopped the movie]

Mrs. Patner: What did he just call him?

Multiple students: Osama.

Mrs. Patner: Why did they call him that?

Student A: Because he looks like Osama bin Laden.

Mrs. Patner: He doesn't really look like Osama bin Laden. Why would they call him that?

Ishaq: Because they think he's Arab.

Mrs. Patner: Right, because they think he's Arab. But, is he Arab?

Student C: Yea.

Student D: Yes.

Mrs. Patner: No, he's Persian. Are Persians Arabs?

[Silence from students]

Mrs. Patner: No, Persians are not the same as Arabs. They are a completely different people group who speak a completely different language!

While the teacher makes an important distinction between Arabs and Persians, she neglects to disrupt the negative positioning of Arabs promoted in the movie. Ishaq vocally resisted this conversation, and claimed an Arab identity for the first time in class:

Ishaq: “Hey, there’s nothing wrong with Arabs!”

No one said anything immediately after that. The teacher went back to playing the movie. When I asked him about this statement, he explained:

Ishaq: Yea, well, it was like kind of saying that Arabs were bad or Persians as better than Arabs. I saw an opportunity where I could say that Arabs aren’t all that bad, so I just kind of said it.

While Ishaq didn’t vocally identify himself as an Arab in class, he was using a named identification that he had shared with me to challenge the movie’s message and the class’s conversation that “Arabs are bad.” As the movie continued and Mrs. Patner brought up discussions on the topic of race, Ishaq started to position himself more as an “Arab.”

Reading Persepolis

When the class started reading and discussing *Persepolis*, Ishaq frequently expressed identification with the experiences of the Persian characters in the book. In class, Mrs. Patner highlighted how the Islamic regime in Iran closed the bilingual schools “in an attempt to isolate them from the rest of the world.” She asked:

Mrs. Patner: Marji was being taught both French and Persian in her school. [Eyebrows raised]. That’s pretty amazing, right? Did any of you end up going to a bilingual elementary school at all?

Ishaq: Actually, I kind of did. When I was in Egypt, I went to Egypt for like six months, and I went to a school, and they taught English and Arabic. And, I'd kind of get mad at the teacher because she couldn't say English words right. And I'd go, "You're saying it wrong." She was like, "You don't know." And I was like, "I'm from America."

Mrs. Patner: I'm sure your teacher loved you for that.

The teacher asked her initial question from a particular perspective of bilingual education, frequently referred to as "elite" or "prestigious" bilingual education, which situates bilingual or trilingual education (with a native 'base' language of English) as a valuable commodity within "elite contexts" (De Mejía, 2002). With this comment, she is drawing from discourses that situate Egypt prior to 1979 as a country that was "Just Like Us" (see Chapter VI) with similar consumer priorities (Fine, 1993, 2002) and a valued player in global capitalism (Greider, 1998; MacLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005). Ishaq, a native Arabic speaker, describes an alternative framework, where he was being taught English in an Arabic-speaking, Egyptian school. He recounts an experience where he corrected his Egyptian teacher's pronunciation of English words, and how he used his hybrid American identity in order to validate his English language expertise: "I'm from America." Ishaq's storytelling publicly positioned him as uniquely able to understand Marji's experience in a bilingual school, thereby giving him more social capital within the discussion, and also more publicly made claim to his hybridity as an Egyptian-American (Aboul-Ela, 2004; Bhabha, 1994, 2013; Huddart, 2005, 2007). However, this experience does not fit within the 'elite bilingual' model Mrs. Patner was searching for and you can read her dis-ease with Ishaq's response with her sarcastic comment: "I'm sure your teacher loved you for that."

In our one-on-one conversations, Ishaq provided insight into his reading of *Persepolis*. In these interviews, Ishaq showed that he viewed the text as counter-story to dominant narratives about Arabs that allowed him to share more about his Arab identity:

Ishaq: It's an intriguing book. I mean I like it.

KA: What's in—why do you find it intriguing?

Ishaq: Because it kind of shows like Arabs in a normal day and state. Like not like what the media blows up and just like—because when you see a media it's like a 15 second clip of like extremists and it's probably most of them. And like in movies or stuff like that when you see Arabs or something you'll see like desert and sand and stuff like that, but it's actually not. We're actually civilized and whatchamacallit progressive.

KA: Yeah.

Ishaq: Yeah. So it kind of shows like Arab in their natural like everyday life and stuff like that. Like it's nothing—like we're kind of—like we're normal. Like there's nothing different.

Me: So where did, when you said that the clips that are shown on the media, where do you feel like those clips show up most often?

Ishaq: Like if there's like a protest or something like they'll show like the violent part. They won't ever show like the people just like standing there or like just standing there not violating. Like when the Arab revolution, like the Arab in Egypt when they protested like in CNN you'd see the people with like smoke bombs and you'd hear like the gunfire, but if you go to like Al Jazeera and stuff like that you'll see people in the Tahrir Square like dancing and singing and kind of having

fun while they're protesting. But like in the English version you see like violence and, yeah, extreme like violence and stuff like that.

KA: Yeah. So is that frustrating to you?

Ishaq: I mean I get mad, but then I'm like well—I do get frustrated, but then sometimes I don't because I mean like it's, I don't know how to say it, it's like because I mean like if you can't really like because people now, more people now kind of know that Arab's aren't all bad, but that's still a small portion of people. But it's better than none I guess you can say.

This conversation points to the powerful ways that Ishaq read *Persepolis* as a “critical fiction” or a “counter-story” ; however, because the book is not written from the perspective of an Arab (Satrapi identifies as Persian), it reflects more of how he used the text to construct his own counter-story to challenge negative representations of Arabs in popular media. On one hand, one could say view this appropriation of counter-story as operating with the Orientalist assumption that the “Middle East” is a monolithic region with similar beliefs, values, and practices, I think that his use of *Persepolis* to construct a counter-story to anti-Arab discourses moreover reflects the importance and need of culturally-relevant texts that represent perspectives that students identify with. In the absence of a book that reflected his experience as an Egyptian-American, he identified strongly with the “first book about the Middle East that [he] had ever read in school.”

In future conversations, Ishaq repeatedly voiced identification with the text and continued to use it to construct a counter-story to anti-Arab bias. In one conversation, he invoked Egyptian diasporic discourses (Bishai, 2013; Hatem, 2013; Somer & Rum, 2013) from home to draw

connections between the torture scenes within *Persepolis* and torture that has taken place in Egypt:

KA: What did you think about those torture scenes?

Ishaq: They're pretty accurate. Yeah.

KA: You think they're pretty accurate?

Ishaq: Yeah. It's like stuff that happened in Egypt so I gather that they're actually pretty accurate and there's more to it, I guess you could say than just that.

KA: Wait, so say more about that.

Ishaq: Well, like my mom said that like there was people who in Egypt were like the CIA, yeah, the CIA -- no, the FBI, the FBI of Egypt or whatever. They would actually pick up people and like people would get killed and stuff and they wouldn't like -- yeah. I mean, it's kind of the same like that. Yeah.

KA: So you think they probably even toned it down a little bit?

Ishaq: Yeah. I'm pretty sure they toned it down a little bit.

Ishaq references stories that his mother has shared about Egypt and fuses them with the American discourses of “CIA” and “FBI,” to both make meaning of the text and validate it as an “accurate” portrayal of Marji’s life and Iranian history. This conversation points to Ishaq’s fusion and hybridity of Egyptian and American discourses.

After the students read the first two chapters, I met with Mrs. Patner and explained the various factors (including US and British involvement) that informed the Cultural Revolution of 1979 and the various ways that the Cultural Revolution has been interpreted. I recommended that

she watch a YouTube video that provided some historical context about Reza Shah's rule and the factors that informed the Cultural Revolution. After watching the video, Mrs. Patner communicated to me that she didn't know any of this history prior to watching and felt that it was important to share with the students. The students watched the video in class. After watching the video, I asked Ishaq about it:

KA: What did you think of the video about the Shah?

Ishaq: I was thinking about Muammar Gaddafi because Muammar Gaddafi, he was like "Oh my people love me, they won't ever hate me!" and then like they slaughter him at the end. And he was like "My people don't like me, they love me," and he kept going back to them when they actually hated him. I saw it more with Muammar Gaddafi than I really did with the Mubarak because Mubarak kind of knew that we hate you. And he got the picture very clear.

KA: I know. The Shah was just a little like he would -- he was a little delusional in some ways.

Ishaq: Yeah, he really was. I found it interesting though that he married the princess of Egypt. I was like "What?" [Smile].

KA: Yea.

Ishaq: I didn't know that.

KA: [Nod].

Ishaq: That was like fun fact for the day.

Here you see Ishaq immediately bring Egyptian diasporic discourses to his viewing of the video about Reza Shah. He shares that Reza Shah reminded him of Gaddafi and what had happened in Lybia, and draws from Egyptian diasporic discourses to contrast Gaddafi and Reza Shah's

experience with Mubarak. He also draws from Egyptian diasporic discourses to highlight, with pride, that Reza Shah had married the princess of Egypt, which he didn't know.

"I am a Muslim"

Ishaq's growing identification with the text as a means of explaining his experience as an Egyptian-American also resulted in more vocal identifications as a Muslim student, an identity that he had not previously vocalized in class. Approximately three weeks into the memoir, Mrs. Patner shared a video and PowerPoint presentation on Islam to both of her classes. This presentation consisted of an introduction to the five pillars of Islam, which she believed her students were not familiar with. During this discussion of Islam, Ishaq repeatedly identified himself as Muslim and used his understanding of Muslim discourses to position himself as a textual expert.

Mrs. Patner: Muslims are very open-minded.

Ishaq: I don't know about that.

Mrs. Patner: You don't think you're open-minded?

Ishaq: There's a time for it.

Mrs. Patner: Okay, right. But, I mean do you, if you're doing something else, just to make it your own. Does that make sense? You're supposed to go. Does that make sense? I didn't mean it like you make up a time of the day. That's not what I meant. I'm sorry. That was kind of vague.

[Talk over]

Mrs. Patner: So, you don't want to stop everything you're doing.

Ishaq: Well technically, you should.

Mrs. Patner: Yes, technically you should. Again, like there's not someone who's going to come around and police you. If you're doing something, like if your wife is having a baby, and you missed the call the prayer at sunset, like I'm pretty sure no one is going to say you're going to hell.

[Talk over]

Student: And like, there's a specific prayer time. There's a time when you pray.

Mrs. Patner: Right.

Ishaq: But I'm not just going to like in the middle of class, get up and just start praying.

Mrs. Patner: Right, but ...

[Talk over]

Mrs. Patner: Technically, you could. You could excuse yourself and go to the bathroom.

Ishaq: No, you can't do that.

Mrs. Patner: You don't want to just get up, you could, well right. But, you could excuse yourself and go to the bathroom.

Ishaq: [Silence].

Mrs. Patner: Do you understand what I'm saying?

Frank: But, some teachers only let you go to the bathroom like twice a class.

Mrs. Patner: Okay. But, I'm going to say "I'm Muslim." You came to your teacher, and you said I'm a Muslim and I would like to be excused from class at such-and-such a time every day so that I can say my daily prayer. If your teacher doesn't let you do that, I'm pretty sure the teacher could get fired.

Frank: Really?
[Talk over]

Mrs. Patner: But, you would also have to be Muslim.

Ishaq: But, I am.

Mrs. Patner: Well you are, but Frank is not.

Ishaq: Well I mean, you looked straight at me.

In this conversation, Ishaq positions himself as a practicing Muslim, an identity position that he had not previously asserted in class ("I am a Muslim"), and uses this position to clarify Islamic rituals of ṣalāt (صلوات). In several instances, he resists Ms. Patner's universalism discourse that attempts to guise specific aspects of Islam that he perceives to be important as "negotiable" or "relative." In the most poignant example, the student tries to explain that a Muslim cannot perform some of the prayers (for instance, *dua* or any prayer including Allah's name) in the bathroom; however, she doesn't understand and thinks that he doesn't understand the rules of school. Eventually, he stops resisting this discourse and remains silent until he feels that the teacher unfairly positions him as "not a Muslim."

In several other instances, Ishaq draws from Muslim and Arabic discourses to position himself as a knowledgeable Muslim, with access to discourses that the teacher doesn't have. For example, when the teacher introduced the third pillar of Islam, *siyam* (صيام), sometimes

represented as *sawm* (صوم), the practice of fasting during Islam's holy month of Ramadan, Ishaq resists her transliteration:

Mrs. Patner: Alright, now, the next link if fasting, okay, or *sowm*. And, this happens during the month of Ramadan.

Ishaq: That's the *si-yaam*.

Mrs. Patner: Yeah, well it's spelled; this is one of those spelled like six different ways. Just because the languages are so different that there are like twenty different accepted spellings. I just picked ...

Student 2: She picked just one.

Mrs. Patner: Okay? So, during the month of Ramadan, Muslims are expected to fast. Now, what's really cool ...

Most Muslims use the term *siyam*, when describing the obligatory fast during Ramadan. The reason for this is that *siyam* is a masdar of the verb *sama*. Throughout the Qur'an, the form *siyam* is almost always used to describe the fasting during Ramadan, so it is believed by most believers and scholars that Mohammed used the word *siyam* to describe the obligatory fasting exclusively; however, because of the frequent use of ikhtalif in Arabic, the *sawm* is also possible and appears once in the Qur'an (Wagtendonk, 1968). Mrs. Patner was taken off guard and defensive about Ishaq's transliteration and pronunciation and explained that "there are like twenty different accepted spellings" and she just picked one. When I asked him about this conversation later, he shared:

KA: What was that like, correcting your teacher?

Ishaq: It wasn't, I guess--if she was going to teach it, I wanted her to teach it correctly. Because that kind of enforces negative stereotypes, not really negative stereotypes

but it doesn't really show all the facts and stuff like that. So, I was like: "OK, if you're going to teach it, let me help you out and tell you the true facts. Not what the state tells you about, but what a practicing Muslim knows and does."

KA: What is the 'state' that you were referring to?

Ishaq: The Board of Education

KA: Oh, OK. So, the "state" is North Carolina? The NC Board of Education?

Ishaq: Yea.

KA: What does the state tell you that a practicing Muslim could tell you?

Ishaq: The Board of Education, the people writing the stuff taught are not Muslim. They just read about it. There's a difference between reading about it and experiencing it.

Ishaq used Muslim and Arabic discourses to construct a counter-story to "what the state tells you" and to instead share "what a practicing Muslim knows and does." He positions himself as having access to a discourse only available to "practicing Muslims," differentiating it from the discourse of "the state," which Mrs. Patner has access to. He used these discourses and counter-stories to construct an identity as an Arab, Muslim that also allowed him to become an "expert" reader of *Persepolis* in the class.

Later, as Mrs. Patner started to explain the *hajj*, or the obligatory pilgrimage to Mecca, Ishaq shared that he had pictures of Mecca. In doing so, he further positioned himself as a Muslim, with access to discourses that the teacher and students didn't have, and went a step further to construct an identity as a wealthy "observant Muslim" who was able to complete the hajj. He volunteered to send the teacher pictures, and she responded by asking him to share information about his hajj to all of her classes, to which he responded enthusiastically.

Presentation

For Ishaq's presentation on the hajj, he created a PowerPoint and chose to present on all of the five pillars. In his presentation, he incorporated transliterated Arabic words and phrases (like the Shahada: "La illaha illa Allah" ("None has the right to worshiped, except Allah") and demonstrated a prayer in Arabic. When I asked him why he decided to present on all of the pillars again, he explained:

Me: So, Mrs. Brown asked you present on the hajj, but I noticed you chose to present on all five pillars. Why did you choose to do that?

Ishaq: I felt like I could get in more details in each pillar. I thought, "If I'm going to present on hajj, I can include the rest of the details on all of them."

Me: So, did you feel like Mrs. Brown didn't include enough details?

Ishaq: She provided enough details to get a good message, what it was about--but I wanted to add in a little bit more. Added in the time (for the day) and how to actually pray. I wanted to teach all of it or most of it...Real Muslims know the tricks and tips. Not what the books say. When you read Qur'an and the hadiths, you will learn something knew every time you read it. I just figured they needed to know something about it. You just get the pictures and not the details, stuff that makes it important."

Again, he draws upon Arabic and Muslim discourses to speak back to "what the books say." He creates a counter-story to what is presented in "the pictures" to provide "the details, stuff that makes it important."

During his presentation, he displayed his identification with *Persepolis* by referencing it at several points during his presentation:

Student: I got a question. Remember that girl who burned a Qur'an? What was your opinion in that? Like were you mad at her? Did you think like why would she do that?

Ishaq: I mean I was mad, but I mean like my anger I guess wouldn't have solved anything. So I was like well it's I guess it's kind of like her decision to do it and if she wants to burn it then like – I don't understand why she would do that, but it's if you guys read *Persepolis* it's the same part. There's a part exactly.

In this example, Ishaq used *Persepolis* to clarify or explain aspects of his belief or experience. He drew comparisons to the Qur'an burning in *Persepolis* and Marji's reception to it to provide insight into his emotional response to Qur'an burning. When I asked him about how he felt presenting the pillars to his class, he explained:

Ishaq: I kind of felt special...I felt like a teacher. Like I was the only one that knew more than Mrs. Brown or something.

After his presentation, the teacher gave a quiz on the five pillars. Before the quiz, students crowded around Ishaq to get a review. He was smiling when this happened, but I asked him about it afterwards. He said:

KA: How did you feel when everyone was crowded around you last week before the pillars quiz?

Ishaq: I like the positive attention. Knowing more than Mrs. Brown. Being the expert in that area.

This comment points to the “reading identity” that Ishaq was developing as he read and talked about *Persepolis* in class.

Becoming a “Good Reader”:

Prior to the project, I asked Ishaq to tell me about his school. During this conversation, he positioned school as a space where he could be social and “escape”; however, he wished it had less “work.”

KA: Tell me a little bit about Millbrook High School. Tell me how you like it...

2B: I mean, I like it. It’s fine. To me, a school is a school. I don’t really have preferences to it, but I mean it’s a nice school. The teachers are nice here.

KA: How would you describe it to someone who has never been here

2B: It’s a nice place. It’s friendly- the teacher’s, they’re nice. They’re helpful. There are a lot of people here, so you could befriend people easily.

KA: Well, that’s good. [sensed an expression from him]. But, it’s school...[laugh]

2B: [laugh] It’s school.

KA: You wouldn’t choose to be here, if you...

2B: Actually, I would.

KA: Would you?

2B: If I had the choice, I actually like it here. It’s an escape here, kind of. You get to hang out with your friends here.

KA: Yea. You get to be social.

2B: I would choose it with less work.

I asked him if he liked to read. He explained:

KA: Do you like to read?

Ishaq: No.

KA: OK, you do not like to read.

Ishaq: Well, I like to read Roman Mythology.

KA: Cool.

Ishaq: That's one of my favorite things to read. I read the Percy Jackson series- love that. I was looking for the other one he made.

KA: So, what about Roman Mythology interests you?

Ishaq: I just love it. I think I like the factor of powers and people getting to manipulate things. The God powers and stuff like that.

I later learned that he had been in English as a Second Language (ESL) class from Kindergarten through 4th grade. As a native-Arabic speaker whose parents spoke minimal English, the first time that he was in an immersive English-speaking environment was Kindergarten at his public elementary school. When I asked him what it was like to be a non-ESL English class, he explained:

Ishaq: I liked it. I got to be with my friends.

KA: How was it different than your ESL class?

Ishaq: The classes were bigger. More of my friends were in there, so I got to joke around with them. [Smile]. We read a lot of books and wrote a lot.

KA: What friends were in your ESL class?

Ishaq: I didn't have many close friends in the ESL class. Most of them spoke Spanish.

KA: But when you came to the non-ESL English class, you had more friends?

Ishaq: Yea.

KA: Nice. So you mentioned that you wrote more in your new classes. Do you like to write?

Ishaq: [laugh] Not really. I mean, I like to write songs and stuff outside of school. Sometimes we write journals in Mrs. Patner's class and I like that.

KA: What about essays?

Ishaq: Yea, essays. I don't like those. [laugh] That's why I like Paideia, because we don't write as much. We get to talk and it's more open than other classes...I mean, I haven't been to [high school] English classes in another school, so I can't really say. But I think, like, English is writing and reading. But in Paideia it's more speaking, discussing, and the things I like to do.

When I looked Ishaq's writing samples, his handwriting was barely legible and there were repeated misspellings. A response that was required to be several paragraphs was several sentences. Over the course of reading *Persepolis*, Ishaq showed tremendous growth in his English class. His teacher explained:

Mrs. Patner: Last Fall, Ishaq failed my class. I thought that he was going to have to drop my class this spring.

KA: Why did he fail?

Mrs. Patner: He wouldn't turn in assignments. He just wouldn't turn anything in. At one point, he had a 40 in my class. He's a smart guy- he just wouldn't turn in homework.

KA: That's wild.

Mrs. Patner: But, since we've started reading Persepolis, he's started turning assignments in. He's participating in class a lot. I've seen a big change. It's been pretty amazing to see.

When I asked him what he attributed to his own academic progress in English, he explained:

Me: Why do you feel like you've done better over the spring semester?

Ishaq: I guess because, academically, I didn't like my grades in the fall semester. So, when the spring semester came, I wanted to buckle down, let me participate and try harder. And then Persepolis came, I can kind of go with it--because it's a comic book and kind of easier. So, I guess that's why I got out of my shell.

Me: What about the comic book made you feel more comfortable?

Ishaq: It was easier to read and pictures to follow.

Me: In our earlier conversations, you mentioned that you volunteered to be a focal participant because you were "Middle Eastern." Do you think that had any influence in your success over the semester?

Ishaq: Yea, I connected with it. Yea, I think that helped with it, too. I had a little background, because I understand Egyptians, Arabs, stuff like that. So, that helped.

Me: So that gave you an advantage because it gave you a little bit of a background?

Ishaq: Yea.

When I problematized his earlier use of the term "Middle Eastern," he explained:

Me: There are some people who critique the use of the term “Middle East,” because it’s lumping together a group of countries that have very different histories and different languages into one region. Do you agree with that?

Ishaq: I don’t agree with that at all. I like the term. I think that it’s empowering-- it’s like showing that all of those countries are together. Even though there are differences.

For Ishaq, the construction of an imagined geography of the Middle East was “empowering.” While he highlights the “differences” between the countries commonly associated with the term, he reports that by “showing that all of those countries are together,” there is power. This “empowering” Middle Eastern identity, reflects some of the reasons why Ishaq was able to construct an identity that allowed him to assert increased agency during the reading of the text.

Conclusions

Many scholars of education have recently devoted their work to understanding the ways in which Arab and Muslim students experience this prejudice in American schools (Sarroub, 2001; Sarroub, 2002; Aswad, 1996; El-Haj, 2006). There has been fruitful work exploring the ways in which Arab girls experience isolation and physical and verbal assaults because of their religious practice (Ajrouch, 2004). There has also been important work done to explore the different experiences of Arab and Muslim teenage boys and girls within American public schools (Sarroub, 2007; Haw, 1998). This work valuably highlights the ways in which schools mirror the fears and concerns of its social contexts and emphasizes the need for schools to counter these prejudicial assumptions.

However, within this work, Arab and Muslims students have often been positioned as victims of prejudice who are powerless to resist and engage with the bigotry around them. In

doing so, educational researchers and practitioners do not see the ways in which Arab and Muslim students resist negative cultural narratives and thereby position themselves as powerful agents in the construction of their hyphenated identities.

This chapter highlights the discourses that Ishaq brought to the literacy event around *Persepolis*. For Ishaq, *Persepolis* served as a powerful counter-story that allowed him to construct his own counter-story to dominant discourses about Arabs and Muslims. Mediated by *Persepolis*, he constructed a more public “Middle Eastern” identity that allowed him to feel like an expert during the reading of *Persepolis*. The mobilization of this “expert” academic identity had not previously existed and continued after reading *Persepolis*. This study not only highlights the ways that Ishaq used *Persepolis* to resist and challenge dominant narratives about Arabs and Muslims; it also contributes to a body of literature that highlights the importance of culturally responsive literature when working with students who identify with regions within “the Middle East”; however, it also stresses the need for more diverse sources of literature from multiple regions that do not require students to conflate regions with diverse languages, beliefs, and literacy practices in order to mobilize this identity.

CHAPTER 10: DECOLONIZING THE PEDAGOGY AND PRACTICES AROUND *PERSEPOLIS* (AND OTHER ‘MIDDLE EASTERN’ LITERATURE)

“...decolonizing pedagogy...must be guided by a conceptually dynamic worldview; strategically utilize theorizations and understandings from various fields and conceptual frameworks to unmask the logics, workings and effects of internal colonial domination, oppression and exploitation...”(Tejada et. al., 2003, p. 21).

Discussion

Using sociocultural theories of literacy, this six-month qualitative research project used critical discourse analysis to analyze the discourse invoked and produced during two classroom literacy events around Marjane Satrapi’s Iranian exilic text, *Persepolis*. In this section, I summarize the research findings to discuss possible implications for the teaching of *Persepolis* and other “Middle Eastern” literature in the English classroom. I propose that teachers can use the findings from this dissertation to inform and develop a decolonizing pedagogy in the classroom around “Middle Eastern” literature. Principals guided by a decolonizing pedagogy can help teachers thoughtful select and teach “Middle Eastern” literature, like *Persepolis*, in order to interrogate the legacies of colonialism and how they are reproduced through Orientalist, neo-Orientalist, and Whiteness discourse.

Summary of Findings and Implications

In Chapter 5, I highlight the Orientalist and neo-Orientalist discourses that students invoked prior to reading *Persepolis*. One of the implications of this chapter is that students come to a text, like *Persepolis*, with pre-existing discourses about the Middle East, primarily informed by the news, film, and other popular media. While various scholars have examined discourse about the Middle East in news media and other texts (Hall, 1992; Kandiyoti, 1996; Mohanty, 1988, 1991; Abu-Lughod, 1998) very little research has made visible the discourses of youth in school contexts. The identification of Orientalist and neo-Orientalist discourse evoked by students informs critical sociocultural theories of literature, which examines the ways in which power and privilege are constructed, enacted, and represented in school contexts. It also informs teacher practitioners, by making visible possible discourses that students might bring to the reading of *Persepolis* or another piece of literature set in the Middle East. By understanding these discourses and the histories that inform them in advance, teachers can more appropriately plan ways to effectively disrupt these discourses.

In Chapter 6, I name some of the students' discursive shifts after reading *Persepolis*. I highlight the students' use of "sameness" discourses ("They're Just Like Us") to minimize difference, yet I discuss how these discourses also mask how whiteness is normalized and privileged through these discourses. I, also, examine how students used *Persepolis* to justify and support the 'authenticity' of Orientalist and neo-Orientalist discourses that kept students from wanting to "live in Iran." Instead, the text seemed to reify American nationalistic discourses. This chapter also examines a unique discourse (It's not serious enough") that students used to position the text as "childish" and "not serious enough." At the end of the unit, some of the students' discourses around Iran and the Middle East shifted to more "liberal" Whiteness discourses introduced by the teacher to inform their reading of the text ("We're all the same");

however, most of the students finished the text with the opinion that it was a “violent place” where they wouldn’t want to live.

In Chapter 7, I discuss the teachers’ and students’ positioning during the unit, which was largely informed by the students’ lack of familiarity with the region and its histories. I highlight how this unique positioning of the teacher lessened student negotiation around the text and resulted in increased appropriation of teacher discourses, which students used in partnership with their pre-existing discourses to make sense of the text. I discuss specific teacher discourses that were used to facilitate critical understanding of the text and “challenge stereotypes of the Middle East”; however, many of these discourses were embedded in specific power relations that privileged a white, American subject. These findings inform critical sociocultural theories of literacy by describing how power and Whiteness were asserted and promulgated on the linguistic and semiotic level in this context.

This chapter also poses a variety of implications for the classroom teacher. First, it is helpful for teachers to be aware of the potential for a shift in student-teaching positioning (or the student-teacher relationship) when reading *Persepolis* or another narrative text set in the Middle East. While teachers might facilitate a reader-response, reader-centered classroom, students’ lack of familiarity with the region has the potential to decrease student negotiation around the text and increase reliance on the teacher’s discourses. Teachers can attempt to diminish this shift in positioning by, first, introducing and positioning the text in non-historical ways that discourage textual consumption. Louise Rosenblatt (1995) calls the literary text “a mode of living”--we navigate texts in the same way that we live our lives, constantly shifting our perspective based on our changing experiences. A teacher can position the text as a “mode of living” by describing the interpretive processes involved in reading--the dialogue between the reader, text, the world (and

other readers, in a class context). When positioning the text, it is also helpful to distinguish between memoir and history and how one reads differently when engaging with the two texts. A teacher could begin by asking students to read a short American memoir and discuss how the author's writing reflects experiences from her perspective, which may or may not reflect the experiences of other Americans.

Secondly, while a memoir situated around an important historical event (like *Persepolis* and the Iranian Revolution of 1979) should not be approached as an historical text, historical and social contexts can be important ways of contextualizing the memoir and resisting a-historical discourses that seek to disguise the history of colonialism and imperialism that inform the historical event (like the Cultural Revolution of 1979). Teachers can contextualize the book by showing films directed and produced within the region about the Cultural Revolution. The teacher can provide multiple translated texts that facilitate a complex understanding of the history and social context of the book. When possible, inviting a community member from the region and/or an historian of the region from the local university can effectively provide an historic and linguistic context for the region in which the text is set.

Teachers can use *Persepolis* along with other Middle Eastern texts to apprentice their students in making transnational racism visible through antiracist pedagogy. Antiracist education, as defined by DiAngelo (2013) is “[a]n educational approach that goes beyond tolerating or celebrating racial diversity and addresses racism as a system of unequal power between whites and people of color” (p. 290). Antiracist education follows in the work of intellectuals, artists, and religious leaders of color to question not “*Is* racism taking place?” but “*How* is racism taking place?” While this discussion is not intended to provide a comprehensive discussion of antiracist pedagogy (please see DiAngelo, 2013;), I hope to draw from antiracist

international social work pedagogy (Razack, 2002, 2005, 2009) to mention a few ways that teachers can make transnational racism visible while reading multiple texts from regions within the Middle East for the sake of promoting a critical global education (cite).

A teacher can explain the history of Whiteness and how it has functioned and continues to function transnationally (and specifically in the Middle East). Students can learn to recognize their own positions and biases, and how those are produced both nationally and internationally (Razack, 2002, 2005, 2009) through discourses of benevolence and paternalism that unintentionally perpetuate colonialism and hegemony. As Razack (2009) writes: “It is also critical to be mindful of whose voices continue to be privileged in such discourse and to be cognizant of how to make connections between the global and the local” (p. 10). Enciso (2003) discusses several ways that teachers can help students make their positions visible through the arts (p. 149-174). A teacher can facilitate close examinations of representations of the Middle East (and the diverse regions within it) in popular media, like the news, film, and television, and learn how to identify Whiteness discourses in the representations that they regularly interact with. When possible, it is important to let individuals who identify with the region to help lead this discussion. The following organizations are a small sample of well-known organizations in the United States committed to thoughtful dialogue about Middle East-US relations. Many have local chapters and members committed to antidiscrimination who advertise their willingness to speak at local schools:

- American Middle East Institute: <http://www.americanmei.org/>
- American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee: <http://www.adc.org/>
- Arab American Institute: <http://www.aaiusa.org/>
- National Network for Arab American Communities: <http://nnaac.org/>

- The Muslim American Society: <http://muslimamericansociety.org/main/>
- American Jewish Committee: <http://www.ajc.org/>

In Chapter 7, I discuss how one Egyptian-American student, Ishaq, used *Persepolis* to construct a counter-narrative to dominant anti-Arab and anti-Muslim discourses in the United States.

Ishaq's story informs the existing literature of the importance of culturally-relevant texts in the literacy and English Education classroom (Au, 2000; Alvermann, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Lee, 2001). While the students' home country of Egypt is very different linguistically, religiously, and historically, Ishaq strongly identified with the novel's events and the author's commitment to challenge negative stereotypes of Iran. The student perceived the text as "the first time that he's read a book about the Middle East in school" and a way to build upon his Egyptian culture and religious identifications to develop a positive reader identity (Alvermann, 2002; Hall, 2009, Moje & Dillon, 2006; Tatum, 2006). While Ishaq's strong identification problematically reinforced student's lasting opinion that "the Middle East is all the same," his relationship with the text points to the importance of incorporating more literature from diverse regions within the Middle East in English classes with students who identify with regions traditionally associated with the Middle East. The following organizations provide a list of possible literature that could be incorporated into the English classroom:

- The Middle East Outreach Council: <http://www.meoc.us/meoc/book-awards>
- Harvard University Center for Middle Eastern Studies:
<http://cmes.hmdc.harvard.edu/outreach>
- University of Arizona's Center for Middle Eastern Studies: <http://cmes.arizona.edu/outreach>

Decolonizing Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy argues that curriculum content and classroom practice specify "what it means to know something" and "how we might construct a representation of our world and our

place within it” (McLaren, 1998; Tejeda, et. al, 2012, p. 18). In this way, the pedagogical is always political. Building from critical pedagogy, Tejeda, et. al (2012) propose a *decolonizing pedagogy and praxis* that makes visible colonial ideological frameworks that are reproduced in and through curriculum and classroom practice.

An important goal of decolonizing pedagogy is to prompt students to understand how their perceptions and actions within the world are guided by how we see ourselves in it (Buttaro, 2010). One of the essential components of Tejeda, et. al’s (2012) decolonizing pedagogy and praxis is the importance of recalling a colonial past and understanding its continued effects.

Drawing from post-colonial theory, they argue that:

“Many of the practices and processes of early colonial domination and capitalist exploitation have been altered, abandoned, or legally terminated, but essential features of that domination and exploitation continue to structure the economic, social, political, and cultural relations between differing groups in contemporary ‘American’ society” (Buttaro, 2010, p. 4)

In order to challenge the colonial project of “historical amnesia” (Gandhi), decolonizing pedagogy must “elaborate forgotten memories of this condition”: “The capacity to recall and articulate forgotten memories of an internal colonial past is essential to the notion and praxis of a decolonizing pedagogy” (1998, p. 7-8, cited in Tejeda, 2012).

While reading a text set in a region within “the Middle East,” for example, it is important to “elaborat[e] forgotten histories” by providing multiple perspectives on the imperial past of a region. While Iran was never technically “colonized” by a European power (which many Iranians pride themselves on), it has a complex imperialist history that is informed by the colonial histories of many of its neighbors. In order to understand the imperialist history of Iran, it is helpful to have at least a basic understanding of the European occupation of contemporary

Iran. IranGeo has a short video that can provide a short, visual history of the changing landscape and geography of contemporary Iran (see “History of Iran in 5 minutes (3200 BCE-2013 CE,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=60IDTA33K0>); however, Homa Katouzian, a native Iranian and one of the leading scholars in Iranian studies, has an exemplary text called *The Persians: Ancient, Mediaeval, and Modern Iran* (2010) that provides a thoughtful and nuanced background of Persia and Iran. Two important historical events that must be clearly understood prior to reading *Persepolis* is: 1) The European military expeditions and subsequent colonization of the regions surrounding Iran and the settlement of Iran; and 2) American involvement in 1950s Iran.

1) The first phase of European military expeditions and colonization took place during the Middle Ages (1095-1972), during which the Crusades were waged in an attempt to control portions of holy land in and near Jerusalem. European colonization of many areas within ‘Middle Eastern’ regions took place in the early 1900s, following the defeat of the Ottoman Empire after World War I. In 1916-1918, the French and British betrayed new leadership within the Ottoman Empire by partitioning the Middle East between them with the Sykes-Picot Agreement. In 1917, under the Balfour Declaration, a region of land within Palestine was given to the International Zionist movement in order to create a Jewish Homeland. During this time, the western half of Palestine was put under British control, which allowed for growth of an already substantial Jewish population. Robert Blyth’s (2003) *The Empire of the Raj: Eastern Africa and the Middle East*, is a useful text for understanding the colonial history of Europe within regions traditionally associated with the term ‘Middle East.’

2) In 1953, the United States worked with the British government to overthrow Iran’s existing democracy and install a Pro-U.S. dictator. The RealPress Video, “History of Iran & USA in 10

minutes” provides a concise history of the events:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q_AHJQiMxIw.

It is important to prompt thoughtful conversations about the possible implications of this history on current portrayals and representations of ‘the Middle East.’ One could begin by examining common representations of ‘the Middle East’ and looking at the history of these representations, in order to expose the constructed and problematic representation of ‘the Middle East’ in the United States. Lina Khatib (2006) and Jack Shaheen (2009) have books which prompt fruitful discussion around representation of the Middle East and Arabs (respectively) in film.

Summary

“Middle Eastern” literature is increasingly being incorporated into the secondary English classroom. While these texts offer promising opportunities as ‘critical fictions’ that disrupt and challenge dominant narratives and stories, they also have the opportunity to reproduce these discourses, if students are not prompted to examine their own positionalities in relationship to the text within a rich understanding of the region’s history and conversations of power.

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